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CULTIVATING COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE

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DAVID PEMBROKE:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to Work with Purpose: A podcast about the Australian Public Service and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. And pay my respects, their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

So listeners, when we think about strong workplace culture, we think about collaboration. It's a crucial part of getting along and producing great outcomes even when we are facing the greatest pressure. Whether it's in the public sector or the private sector, everyone is encouraged to collaborate, to get along to work together. But how do we do it well? And importantly, how do we do it when the heat is on? Today, we are going to discuss a program that started at the attorney general's department with its origins in the industrial relations team, where due to changes in the machinery of government, an extensive work program, Martin Hehir and his team wanted to improve their advisory, legislative, and policy processes to better leverage and integrate the expertise across the entire team.

Now, at the time, Martin had an inkling that better collaboration would be at the heart of better performance. So he phoned a friend and brought in some external help from Kathy Hilyard. Now, along the way, this program profoundly changed the way leaders interacted within teams and with each other, producing a toolkit for leaders to use to better understand themselves under pressure to self-reflect and to collaborate effectively. So let's meet Kathy and Martin. Martin Hehir PSM is now Deputy Secretary Governance and Corporate and Chief Operating Officer at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Prior to joining PM&C, Martin was the Deputy Secretary of Workplace Relations, where he led a range of industrial relations policy and programs, and indeed has held multiple deputy secretary roles responsible for areas including developing a new employment services model, work health and safety policy, and small business and industrial relations policy. Martin, welcome to you.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Thank you.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Kathy Hilyard is a co-founder of the Centre for Collective Leadership, a for-purpose business established in 2023 to research, facilitate,

experiment, design and cultivate leadership and governance practices in complex organisations. She works within groups, organisations, leadership teams as a facilitator and advisor, and sometimes a provocateur. She's pioneering work on leadership for complex settings. Kathy has worked in and for public sector organisations for over 30 years, including in community services, health, regional development, and at the Australian Public Service Commission. Kathy, welcome to you.

KATHY HILYARD:

Thank you, David.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So Martin, this program, and this problem really that it started with, can you take us back to the time when you realised that better was needed if indeed you were going to perform and your team was going to perform better?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Yeah, I can. Like many public service teams, during Covid, we were actually under a lot of pressure to deliver. Our timeframes were really tight. And while the work we did often sat at the background of people's minds, so a lot of people don't think about their Fair Work Act as being part of some of the issues that need to be resolved during Covid, but it was. However, we also did work health and safety policy. And we supported the government around work health and safety, which was at the front of everyone's minds during Covid. So we'd gone through two years of really intense work. And we'd delivered. We'd done a really, really good job. So the teams had done exactly what we'd asked them.

But when we looked at the survey results afterwards, they were really unhappy, and they were really unhappy with their leadership. So that was us, that was myself and my team. And the messages we were getting from the group when we went out was they didn't feel that we were connected. And that was the point where we realised we had to change and think about how we were doing things.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So in that period though, were you picking up that they weren't happy or was the pressure of the situation during that time, which was a unique pressure, an unusual time, did you just have so much going on that you maybe weren't paying attention?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

A little bit of both. So what I was seeing was people under pressure reacting differently to what I was used to. So their behaviours changed or how they presented themselves changed. And I'll put that down to the pressure that we are under. And I don't think that's wrong,

but we probably let it go because we were focused on the delivery rather than picking up and changing it.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And so this notion of improvement where you got the results... Well actually, before we get to that, what did you feel personally when you've got these results back and you thought, "Oh, okay. We've performed well, but this is just telling me that the team is deeply dissatisfied."

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So I thought probably I need to act. So there's a little bit about me, which I can be a bit analytical. So I stepped back and went, "Oh, we need to do something about this." I didn't necessarily take it personally. And I think taking it personally would've been the wrong thing to do. We do these surveys for a purpose.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yes.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: And my focus was, actually how do we respond to this? They're telling us something really, really important that we need to stop and listen.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But did you have a sense at the time of what a solution looked like? Or was it at that point where you thought, "Hang on. Actually, I can diagnose this, but maybe I need a second opinion"?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So I did. I had two things that I was thinking about. And one wasn't going to work without the other, I think, in the end. So I really wanted to change our style of working to try and make sure that the different teams and skills and capabilities were more involved from the beginning to the end of a process. That wasn't how the teams had been working. They'd been broken very much into their professional skills. But to do that, we had to figure out how we got people to collaborate. And it was at that point that we decided we need help to figure out how could we help teams to collaborate.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But was it the fact that they were broken into teams around their particular skills that was unique to Covid, that they had to work that way at that time?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: No.

DAVID PEMBROKE: No.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: It was a historical artefact.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

That's how the teams had done. And important for them, in many ways, they saw themselves as they're professionals, whether they be lawyers, whether they be economists, or whether they be policy people. They saw themselves as that. And they saw their peers as important to that. So getting them to work and engage with the economists, the policy and the lawyers right from the start of a process was, I think they wanted to that, but they liked the safety of their teams as well.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Okay. So Kathy, take me to the time when Martin's on the phone. He says, "I've got some results here that I'm not thrilled about, but I want to get a solution to this." Take us through the conversation as you heard it at that particular time. Because the way Martin articulated it to you may have been different to the way that you thought about that.

KATHY HILYARD:

Well, I do recall quite a funny meeting actually, where we came in to meet with Martin and a few other people in your team, because Martin had a very clear sense of what he wanted to achieve, I think, but not everyone was convinced that there was a problem to be solved here. I think it was maybe the way that I saw it. And so we had a very interesting conversation. I think you talked to a few people at the time about we want to this thing. I know I need to do some work. I'm not sure what the path forward is, but we can see the end result we're looking for. And so we threw around some ideas and I think that informed then our requests to get some help.

And even when we came in to do the work, we had a bit of an approach, but not a method. We were experimenting together with this, I think, because it was a social challenge as much as it was a structural or technical one.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

There's also an element there where some of the team had changed. So quite often, you do see, at the end of a particular period, some change in the team. So not everyone had gone through the same things that other team members had. So there was a bit of, oh, why is this happening from some of the team members?

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Was it a contested meeting where people were this, "Oh, hang on, I don't see this problem. This is not a problem."? Although was the data sitting at the heart of it where you're saying, "Well, actually, we do have a problem because here are the numbers."

KATHY HILYARD:

Yeah. Maybe there was a clarity that there was an issue, but a bit of a contested space around how to go about making progress on it, if you

like. But it was an interesting discussion because people had different views.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And how many people had you gathered at this point in time?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So it would've been myself, my four division heads and one or two others-

KATHY HILYARD: Yes.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: ... who were running the project.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. So Kathy, from your point of view, as the professional who was to come in and try to pick it apart to put it back together, what did that process look like, and how did you work with Martin and his team to develop the program?

KATHY HILYARD: So we thought a lot about how do you enact and enable leadership in this work. So a lot of the work that we came in to do was really just to facilitate a whole series of different ways of engaging people in the leadership work that was going to lead to the shift in culture. So we worked with Martin and his leadership team, almost like facilitated sessions for them to have conversations about what leadership looked like to create a more collaborative culture and what that meant for them and their work. We used some tools to do that. We also did something quite interesting, I think, which was, we ran a little survey process to try and find people who were influential in the group.

DAVID PEMBROKE: This is further down in the overall-

KATHY HILYARD: Further down. And we didn't want to go by level-by-level in a traditional way. We thought leadership can happen anywhere. Sometimes, the least senior people are as influential as some of the people in the top. So we found a group of around 16 people and we spent quite a bit of time with those people, again, more facilitating than doing anything, bringing expertise in particular, but we facilitated a process for them to build out what we called, I think, a playbook.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah, you did. And from my perspective, it is really interesting. My first feeling is, we'll just roll this out across the organisation. That'll fix it. And Kathy and the team were really clear with, "No, we've got to start with you, Martin, and we've got to start with your immediate reports." You guys need-

KATHY HILYARD: Courageous.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: The survey's about the leadership, and people seeing you as disconnected from each other.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So we've got to work and get you guys to understand what collaboration and leadership is in a different way. And that was really quite challenging. So it was a range of different tools that were done. So Kathy didn't use the standard Myers-Briggs assessment when we did our how do we work thing. She used a model which I'll butcher, but I'll get Kathy to explain properly, which basically looks at your work preferences when you're not under pressure, and then how you work when you are under pressure, and just picks up and demonstrates really clearly how people's behaviour can change quite dramatically when they're under pressure. Lovely insight, given what a lot of us had just been through.

And then we went on a hothouse almost of academic reading where we were just getting articles out of Harvard and academics and TED talks and we just had to be prepared. Can't remember, was this fortnightly?

KATHY HILYARD: I think it started out fortnightly.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah. And then we were quizzed. And then what did we learn and how did it make us feel? So we really actually had to... And this is myself and my four division heads. We really had to open up and be authentic with each other. In a way-

DAVID PEMBROKE: How did that go? That sort of sense of challenge and vulnerability where you've got to accept, "Okay, we've got a problem here and I'm having a good look in the mirror here. Probably a bit often then I'd like to."

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: That's right. So we're senior public servants. So statistically, we're much more likely to be introverted than anything else. So opening up and sharing is actually hard work.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Really hard work. And there were a number of times where I just found I went, "I don't know that we've really being honest with each other."

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: And I then had to say, "Well, I've got to lead." And so I'd have to share something quite personal or things I wouldn't have wanted to share in a job interview, for example. So it really helped... It was a really great component to us learning to work together as a team in environments that were stressful.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And was it important that you were reaching for higher performance? That's what you were looking for. You were looking for high performance. So was that the North Star that you kept going back to, that we've got to get better here?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah, absolutely. And a lot of the reading really helped, not surprising.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yes.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: But the opportunity to talk about and apply it to ourselves was probably the critical thing there. And it was only when Kathy's team were comfortable that we'd actually reached a point where we understood what we were trying to achieve, that we could model collaboration ourselves, that we then started to roll it out more broadly. So we had to be seen by the team as being able to work together. That doesn't mean we always agreed, but what it meant was that we were always able to show we were working for the best outcome.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. Now, I'm sure many of our listeners have, before we get to the wider program, they're still interested in understanding unpicking this cohort of the Dept. Secs. and the division heads. How did you go about understanding how they work under pressure and how they work normally? What are some of those tools that you used?

KATHY HILYARD: So we used a proprietary tool called the Strength Deployment Inventory. So it's an inventory, it's pretty simple, high face validity. It's not a deeply psychometric tool or anything, but it's really about relationship intelligence.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

KATHY HILYARD: And so what we're trying to do is get this team to show up with each other in a relational way, not just in a managerial, showing up with my propaganda about my job and sharing, but actually having a collective approach to how they were leading the whole. So we did some sessions with this tool. And we facilitated, I think, what I would say is... I mean, some of the articles, I remember one resonating early about experts are the hardest to get to collaborate. Right?

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

KATHY HILYARD: And that was something that just was like a bit of a light bulb for the group. I think it's like, "Oh, that's why this is hard. It's not that there's something wrong with us. It's actually hard work to do this." And it's not for the faint-hearted actually.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But how long did it take for this group of elite public servants to start to work together, to have those insights, to start to collaborate, again, as you both pointed out, before you could actually lead further into the organisation?

KATHY HILYARD: I think we probably did around four or five sessions before we started to go further. We were planning things on the side and learning from what we were doing with Martin's group about the work that might be involved with others as we went. But yeah, it was a little bit of time. And you and I had quite a few calls on the side just together, didn't we, saying, "Gee, are we making progress on it?" Yes, it's progress. It's okay.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But that's to the point I was going... So no progress is linear and up and to the right. So where were the setback moments? Where were the really hard problems that you had to crack to reach those higher levels of collaboration?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: I don't know that there were things that we had to crack. So we're busy people.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yes.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So even in quiet times, we're managing a team of 300 odd people. And there's work always going on. So as I said earlier, sometimes it was hard to get people to step in and be open. Often it's hard for us to talk about things that didn't go right. So they were the pieces where I'd often call Kathy and go, "I don't think we've quite cracked that conversation."

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: But is that because they're carrying all sorts of a million different things in their minds and heads and they're busy, and all of a sudden, I've now got to take myself to another place in a busy day. And as soon as this finishes, I've actually got to get back because the minister's office is ringing and I've got... So absolutely that's a key part of it. But there's also, I think there's a model of leadership in the public service where we don't expose ourselves, where we project

confidence and we project a belief. And part of that is you've got to believe it to be able to project it properly. So to get past that confidence, and yes, we can deliver because we've always delivered, it just takes time to open up.

KATHY HILYARD:

I think there were some other things that happened around that too, around, you did some things about moving people into new roles. So Martin almost deliberately made people feel uncomfortable.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Chummed the waters a little.

KATHY HILYARD:

Yes. And I think if you're going to lead change and particularly cultural change when it's complex, discomfort goes with it. So it was letting people be in roles where they didn't have expertise, but they had to lead, was a really good move. And there was some other things like projects. You'll talk about that, I think, Martin, but some of the structural things about setting up teams that worked differently together. And then we were bringing some of the more social and interpersonal glue that wrapped around that, if you like. So there was quite a bit going on.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So the projects.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

What was that?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

So look, one of the things that we had identified early was this view that people felt disconnected from the entire process. So my legal team would say, "We just get things given to us too late. We don't have a chance to put in early." And my economists would say, "Well, we're not really getting the data informing the policy." And the policy people would say, "Oh, they're not really hearing us properly there and understanding what we're trying to achieve because their work was done in those specialties." And that's Kathy's comment earlier about professionals are the hardest to get to collaborate. When I read that article, I went, "Aha." Because I had assumed the opposite.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

I had thought professionals would be the easiest people to get to collaborate.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Because?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Because they're educated.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. Emotionally intelligent.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Emotionally intelligent. They've generally got good social skills.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: But no. Because they're trained in their expertise, and that's their expertise they reference, I think is a lot of it. So part of what I wanted to do... And I said earlier, the teams were wedded to their structures, if that makes sense. You could put them into a number of different structures, but I didn't think that was going to be productive. So what we decided to do was actually create multidisciplinary teams to run projects. And rather than trying to swallow the dragon as a whole, if you like, what we did was break it up. Actually identify particular elements that we could run as a project, and then put together the economists and the policy teams and the lawyers and have them work together from the start to the finish.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, that was new for you, but were you drawing down on case studies or examples from elsewhere? Or was this something that you thought, "Hang on. I think this is quite unique to us. Let's go about it this way."

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: No. Look, I think it's fairly common model, and I'd use variations of it in previous roles.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So multidisciplinary teams are nothing new. Having people responsible for the implementation, work with the people responsible for policy design, we used it in all sorts of ways. I'd certainly use it in IT, app development, et cetera. So we were just applying it in a different environment or an environment where it hadn't really been applied for those particular teams in that way.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So Kathy, how did it work then? When you're talking about a traditional organisation that's done the work this way for a long time, they're used to doing it that way, how do you overcome that resistance? How did you and Martin build enthusiasm and competence to participate and work in multidisciplinary teams?

KATHY HILYARD: Well, I mean, I think Martin did a lot of the heavy lifting on that. I think what our approach was, was to bring people together in different combinations and really facilitate connection. So getting people to have conversations they hadn't had before with people that they probably passed in the corridor every day but didn't work with.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Sorry. Those conversations, they're not about the work. Were they personal conversations? Were they about, "Hi. I'm Jeremy and I'm from so-and-so. And I..."? Is it...

KATHY HILYARD: No. Well, that's a great question. I think our approach is more to, we call it doing the thing while you're doing the thing. So the conversations were about the work and the challenges of the work and the pressure. And in those conversations, people are making connections. So you're not trying to have artificial, force people to be interpersonally disclosing things or anything, where actually...

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, we do make connection with people. It's like when you introduce to people and you get to know them.

KATHY HILYARD: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: You build a commonality.

KATHY HILYARD: So finding common ground, I mean, the tool helped in some ways with that because it gave people a different language. So you hear them then using this language of, "Oh, I've gone green or red," or whatever the thing is. And then people say, "Oh, I know what that means." And so there's language then that's shared that's enabling people to, what I would say is, look at the music, not just the lyric when they're working together. They're seeing the dynamic as well as the conversation, the content. So we were just building those, that awareness and that capability I think. And then with this other crowd, we called them influencers,-

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

KATHY HILYARD: ... but that wasn't a popular term.

DAVID PEMBROKE: No.

KATHY HILYARD: We worked with them to help them insert themselves into the project teams and the meetings and so on, and be the observers and the people who said, "Hang on. Is that really collaboration?" So we built their confidence and capability to make process observations about how the teams were working in flight.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. So I'm intrigued by that identification of the 16. And let's say, as you mentioned before, around about 300. You've found the 16, and they're all from the bottom, from the top and all the different places. When Kathy and her team turned it up and said, "Martin, there's the SEAL team. These are the ones who are going to start driving." Were

you surprised by what you saw there? Or was it like, "Oh yeah, I've thought about that or have identified that?"

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Look, there are a couple of names where you go, "Oh, really?"

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: But no. So that concept wasn't foreign to me. I'd done a lot of work in service delivery agencies over the years, and I'm used to the idea that actually it doesn't have to be someone at the SES or even the EL level who's an influencer. Identifying influencers has been part of my practice for a long time. So some of the names surprised me, but even that doesn't really surprise me. It's always interesting, the capability that some people have to influence a discussion when you're not always seeing it in operation. So yeah, some of the names surprised me. But the fact that they were 16 and they were at all different levels now.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. So in terms then of the program itself, as it made its way and it's made its progress and you've got the multidisciplinary teams, you've got the projects, you've got your SEAL team 16 doing their business wherever, how did it roll out and how did you start to see the progress? How did it manifest itself? And where were the moments where you thought, "Ah, we're going better here, I'm seeing it"?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yes. So there were a few iterations. And by the time I finished within industrial relations, we'd probably done about three iterations of it. So probably the time that we... And we had to do it at implement on the run. So it was just post-election, a new government, and they had a very strong industrial relations or workplace relations legislative focus. And we had to get moving. And it was at that time that we decided to try and use the project teams using our collaboration tools to actually try and deliver. And was it perfect? No. But what we did was we then talked to the teams post and we said, "Do you want to keep going? And if you do want to keep going, what are the changes that you want?" And when-

DAVID PEMBROKE: At what point was that? How long-

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So that was after our first tranche of...

DAVID PEMBROKE: So how long?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Eight or nine months.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Oh, okay. All right. Yeah. Okay. You'd been at it for a while.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yep. And we knew we'd cracked it when they said, "Yeah, we want to keep working like this." So that wasn't unanimous, but that was very strong. And when they came back through and said the changes they wanted, you knew they are invested. It wasn't just a case of, "Martin's going to keep doing this, we might as well just do it."

DAVID PEMBROKE: What sort of things were they asking for?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Oh, look, I can't remember.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But the smallish details, were they?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: In some ways, they were smallish details, but they were also significant. So you could see that they had thought about them and they were going, "Actually, we believe that change will make a difference to us." It wasn't the fact they said yes that convinced me. It was the fact that they then had some recommendations and changes that told me they were investing.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. And after eight or nine months, did you go back around the boy to do the surveys again to see?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah? And?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: And same thing. So still that commitment to it.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. But much greater satisfaction?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah, I think so. So during this time, we actually had I think two rounds of APSC surveys.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: And what we saw come back in was a much stronger leadership and higher level of satisfaction.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Right.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So the scores in relation to direct SES manager and SES overall had really started to pick up and then picked up again. So what we saw was people responding both on the ground, but also saying, "Actually, we're happier." Now, it doesn't mean they were happy, completely happy.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Coming off a low base though.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: That's right. We always want more from our leaders, don't we?

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: And they're right to demand that. But we had a measure, we could see it coming through.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

KATHY HILYARD: I think one of the things you talk about that was a signal to you too, which I really liked, Martin, is the fact that people were learning to disagree with each other. So people sometimes think the idea of collaboration is all about being nice and everybody playing nicely in the sandpit sort of thing. But there was actually these moments when you could see that people who might've just been quiet and gone away and done their own thing were actually engaging in ways to disagree and with respect and grace, but make better progress than they would've otherwise.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Yeah. I mean, they were great moments to watch. When you saw people actually go... There's different personalities always. Some people are conflict avoiders, some people who engage with conflict, et cetera, people who compromise, et cetera. And we got to the process where we talked none of those are collaboration. And when we saw people and the teams practiced it, I always found it odd. They did their rumbles, so that actually practice disagreeing with each other. So they choose a challenging topic and organise to discuss it and just be prepared to put some really hard things on the table. And that was really impressive.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So how important was it to have the frameworks and the processes and the structures to deliver this improvement? Couldn't have done it without it?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: Couldn't have done it without it.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. Okay.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM: So, would the project teams have worked as well as they did noting that they're ongoing process for improvement? No. They had to learn how to collaborate to make that effective.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And Kathy, your role really, it sounds like... Again, you are the expert. You have the frameworks. But it's really, the answers are in the room with the people by the sounds of things, isn't it? And you are just

guiding, structuring and allowing them to learn to collaborate, learn to improve.

KATHY HILYARD:

Yeah. And that's very much the philosophy we came in with was, these know what the work is, they know how to do the work, they've got the answers. It's just about us helping them to have conversations they wouldn't have had otherwise. And once they got practiced at that and had a few hooks to hang those things off, like the rumbles...

DAVID PEMBROKE:

That sounds interesting. A rumble.

KATHY HILYARD:

A rumble. Yes, that's a Brené Brown little method and it piques people's interest generally. But it's really about some quite explicit rules of engagement to go in to really... Basically it's from West Side Story, right? To rumble around on an issue. And people quite like that, I think, when it's permission to do it. Whereas if you don't have permission to do it, you have all this theatre of who has to say what when. And so we were just giving... It was lots of little experiments really, and us scaffolding those so people could find their own way of going about this work.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

How do you sustain it? How do you avoid people going back to bad ways, to bad habits?

KATHY HILYARD:

You've got an answer to that. I've got one thing I'd say. And one is really, it's that work with the leadership-

DAVID PEMBROKE:

The leadership.

KATHY HILYARD:

... work and recognising that everyone's a leader in that work. It's not about position, it's actually the leadership role you take on. But having that senior team really engaged in it and speaking from the same song sheet, I think, reinforced all the time. And then seeing at work. I mean, these guys were under a lot of pressure, and they were finding better ways to produce the work under that pressure. So it was sort of speaking for itself, I think.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Yeah.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Yeah. And I think the reality is, towards the end, we weren't going back to it as much as we needed to. And we were becoming quite conscious, actually, had been a little bit of time and we needed to stop and refresh. Now, I changed jobs, so I don't quite know where they've ended up. But we'd become quite conscious that yes we were using the tools, but we probably needed to stop and go back and refresh and do the reading again and have the discussions again and

just try and make sure that we are being honest with each other in the room and that we're able to have those tough conversations.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Yeah. Okay. Now we're coming up close to time, but I'm keen to get you to summarise your top three points. I might start with you, martin. What are the three things that leaders such as yourself, at that deputy and divisional level, what are the things that you have to do to drive high performance through greater collaboration?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Well, we've got to lead. We've got to demonstrate. So I often talk to people about, the teams are watching not just what you say, but how you walk into the room, how you behave to other people. And what was really clear from our first set of results and from our reading was the teams were seeing that we weren't connected. And to connect, we had to be honest. So honest and respectful. So we probably haven't talked about that enough. Respectful engagement, safe engagement is the only way that you can actually collaborate properly.

As soon as someone hears a sharp tone, as soon as someone hears a personal criticism, it stops being collaboration. So figuring out how you have those hard conversations without letting it get or making people feel unsafe is really important. Probably the other thing that I don't talk about often, but work became fun again, which is because we're engaging in a different way. I think we all relaxed and work became fun again. Even if it was hard, it became fun.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Yeah. It's interesting. Blair Comley, the Secretary of the Department of Health was in here a couple of weeks ago for a chat. And he mentioned that. He talked about fun. The big smile broke up over his face. It's fun. Well, it's important work though, isn't it? You're solving big problems for the benefit of the Australian people. So the work is important. But it is just getting that bit right, isn't it? As being able to work together.

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And Kathy, for you, what are the big lessons for you out of this particular program of work, which clearly delivered significant benefits? Now, let's hope it's been sustained over time. But clearly you delivered a program of value.

KATHY HILYARD:

Yeah. I think, for me, this idea of conscious leadership, making conscious choices about how we're showing up, and then holding people to account, being clear about the different ways you want

people to work, and then giving them the tools is key. Not having some separate program of training and putting people through sausage machine style activities, but actually using the work and the flow of the work to experiment with different things, that seems to be a key. And then the right things will grab and people will continue on.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Now, you're clearly very experienced in this space. What's your general view of the performance of the APS in this particular area? Are we travelling well? Are we okay? There's always room for improvement, biggest room in the house, but what would be your general observation?

KATHY HILYARD:

I think my biggest... I think we've been talking about collaboration in the APS and in the public sector for a very long time. And I think reality's got... There's a little bit of a way to catch up to the rhetoric. But I think, within agencies, probably we're much better at it than we used to be. I think across agencies and across jurisdictions, we've still got a bit of work to go. And there's a lot more pressure now that we're dealing with a lot of very complex integrated challenges. Some of those biggest policy challenges we have are cross-cutting and complex and so on. And they're asking more of us in terms of collaboration. And that's a social challenge, not just a structural challenge. And I think there's the work. There's work to do there. But there's progress.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Yeah. Martin, perhaps just as a final point, really just working off what Kathy just said, this narrative point of whole of government, whole of nation is now being applied in all sorts of areas, not just the national defence, but in all parts of the endeavour of the national government or the national effort. How as a senior public servant you look at that? You think about that? How can we do that? How do we achieve whole of government, whole of nation progress and collaboration?

MARTIN HEHIR PSM:

I suppose my career in the Commonwealth has actually been mainly in quite specific areas, in line agency. So my experience there is a bit different. However, I did spend some time in the ACT government. That was the first part of my career. I was a director general, the community services director just before I came over to the Commonwealth. And the conversation there of one government is a conversation I really like. They understand that they're servicing the people of the community and that they impact each other. And it's a work done by Allan Hawke who helped the ACT together with that model.

But with the Commonwealth, it's bigger and it's harder. And there's probably less connection than there is in the ACT in terms of that really direct feedback you get from being so close to the community. But I do think that people are engaged in it and people want it to happen. So we'll get there. I think it's just going to have to be a different process than the one that I, if you like, grew up with.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Yeah, indeed. Well listen, we could talk all night, as they say. There's so much to talk about because public service is so interesting, and performance in the public service is so interesting, which is why we do this podcast, because every week we have such fascinating conversations with interesting guests such as Kathy and Martin. So a big thanks to both of you for coming in today to share a great story. And thanks for being so open, because I think there's a lot of learning in all of that. And I'm sure people were thinking, "Okay, maybe let's take a few of those ideas and take them to work next week and see if we can collaborate in the best interests of the Australian people." So thank you so much for coming in today.

And to you, the listeners, thank you for coming back once again. There are plenty of episodes of Work with Purpose that are sitting there as a catalogue. And I mentioned the other day, we had this fantastic review of a person interested in the APS who just discovered Work with Purpose. And they were so thrilled to be able to go back through the archive to listen to all sorts of great conversations that we do have. So please avail yourself of that opportunity. And while you're there, a rating or a review of the program, it does help us to be found. So you can be like that person who rated us the other day. I'm very grateful for them, for that feedback as well.

You can follow the latest about Work with Purpose at both [contentgroup](#) and also [IPAA ACT](#) on LinkedIn. There is all sorts of information that Julia Ahrens is working day and night here at Work with Purpose to make things happen. So Work with Purpose is produced as a collaboration between [contentgroup](#) and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT, and supported by our very good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. So a big thanks to the APSC.

So again, thanks to you. Thanks to Martin. Thanks to Kathy. And we'll be back at the same time in a fortnight with our next episode of Work with Purpose. My name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

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