



TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | EPISODE #123

WORK WITH PURPOSE 2024: (UN) WRAPPED

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DAVID PEMBROKE

Hello everyone, and welcome 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 broadcasting from today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. Indeed, I'd like to acknowledge all the custodians of the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

As the year draws to a close, we're excited to bring you a year in review program. In 2024, we've explored the most pressing challenges and opportunities, and transformative ideas, that are shaping Australia's public service.

From re-imagining leadership, to collaboration, workplace safety, ethical governance and innovation. These conversations have sparked many discussions with our audience.

We've also looked at human-centred design, the power of leadership under pressure and how collaboration can thrive even in the most toughest environments.

Workplace safety also took centre stage, as we examined strategies to address psychosocial hazards and build healthier workplaces.

On the front lines of governance, we unpacked the tools for effective policymaking and reflected on the critical role of national security and defence.

And, of course, we celebrated stories of great passion in public service, and the innovative strategies that led to many program successes.

Today, we'll revisit some of our most popular episodes, highlighting key moments and practical insights, from what has been a remarkable year on work with purpose.

Whether you are a seasoned and experienced public servant, or perhaps just stepping into the public sector for the first time, this episode has a lot to offer. And I know it will inspire and energise you for a very busy 2025.

So, let's get started. Join us, as we reflect on the biggest ideas and achievements of 2024.

So, let's begin with human-centred design, a powerful approach that puts people at the heart of public service. It's about understanding the real needs, embracing diverse perspectives, and creating solutions that work for everyone.

It's also been mandated by the Albanese Government, that policy really look at human-centred design, and make sure that that stakeholder and community engagement takes place, so policymakers can really understand where and how and what people are thinking.

In this particular segment, Bec Bodel, who's the Acting Assistant Commissioner of Behavioural Insights and Design at the Australian Taxation Office, shares her insights on setting clear goals, fostering collaboration, and designing systems that truly serve the community.

BEC BODEL

On a really basic level, I think there's sort of three things that I think about if I was a public servant faced with a challenge, and I was trying to think about how best to solve that.

I think the first thing, is know your purpose, know what you're trying to do, setting a really clear goal, understanding what it is that you're trying to deliver. Make sure everyone's on the same page, particularly there are so many different perspectives just within the ATO, or within the public service in general, and you have so many different stakeholders, being really clear on what it is that you're trying to do collectively.

And then I think about taking a principles-based approach to these things. So, it's not always that you can go through your lovely design process, but things like engaging in diversity of thinking. So, as we said, there's lots of different people. It really is to your benefit to be involving those different voices.

So, where you can, the people who are going to be the recipient of the policy, or the product, or the service that you're designing, but also other areas of government.

I think there's so much for us to benefit if we think about what services Australia is doing and how that overlaps with what the Tax Office is doing, and how we're helping citizens, in general, engage with government.

And then I think connected to that, is understanding the whole and not just the parts. If we think about trying to, for example, improve tax performance of small businesses, well, what are all of the different things that are happening in the system for them, and how are we thinking about that holistically and collectively? They also have obligations to other parts of government. They might be accessing grants, they might be paying superannuation, all those kinds of things that come together to form a more complete picture.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Bec Bodel from the Australian Tax Office. So, we also heard from Colonel Jennifer Harris AC, who reminds us that when you're driving change or implementing new programs in complex systems, such as big Australian public service departments, you need to keep people at the core of your work.

COLONEL JENNIFER HARRIS

If we look at organisational change, and we look at any organisation as a complex adaptive system, and I'm not going to get too down in the weeds on this one, but you need to look at this system from a whole of entity perspective.

You then look at the system, from the internal architecture perspective, and then you dive straight into what is central to change, which is people, and that cognitive element.

So, all those things still remain in any transformation outcome. However, in a digital transformation sense, there are a number of other behaviours that were really exposed, that complicate it even further.

People often approach digital transformation as, "If I can just get all my data together in one big swamp, just bring it all together, hopefully these insights will bubble to the surface." That's not going to happen. You need

to start with a good question, but so many digital transformations start with, "Let's just get all the data. Just give me all the data."

The second aspect is this black box mentality. "Contractor X, I want you to give me an application that would show me Y, and then we'll take all this big data swamp, and we plug it in and then show me why." Again, it's not a helpful process. And you then get this pathology, where people are trying to, "You prove to me that this application is going to be better than this PowerPoint that I produce every month, to update my senior leaders on where my project's at."

And the final thing, is we don't have a great historical experience. So, when people look at digital transformation, when they look at how we've performed before in introducing a new application, they have this bias already when you start. So, all of this is coming together.

But in manage it in a large organisation, if you can understand those levels, you can actually manage and help people navigate change more effectively.

So, at that entity level, and I think this is really important for the public service, and all of our government architecture, in the private sector, you are motivated by market forces and profit. If you don't evolve, you will cease to exist. In the public sector, there's not that same motivation. And so recognising that is important. How do you bring a whole of organisation along when there isn't that existential threat?

DAVID PEMBROKE

Colonel Jen Harris from the Australian Army, that was an outstanding conversation. So, if you do have time, that's episode 119.

So, next we turn to leadership and collaboration, which are the key drivers of success in the public sector. Strong leadership isn't just about decision making, it's about empowering teams, building trust, and working together to solve complex problems.

Here, we'll hear from Blair Comley, who's the Secretary of the Federal Department of Health, Matt Yannopoulos, the Associate Secretary of Defence, and Martin Hehir who currently works with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. But we spoke to him about a project when he was a deputy at the Department of Education.

These three gentlemen share their insights on leading under pressure, building partnerships, and creating environments where collaboration thrives.

The first piece of advice is from Blair Comley.

BLAIR COMLEY PSM

I think about devolution actually does three things for an organisation. The first thing it does, is it reduces risk. And a lot of people think, "How can it reduce risk?" And I'll come back to that. I think it increases quality, and it increases the level of satisfaction of the staff who've had the work devolved to them.

And the reason I think it does all those three things, is what's the alternative to devolution? The alternative to devolution, is that a really senior person clears everything. But if you're a really senior person, and you're clearing a hundred things a week or a thousand things a week, that's

not actually very good risk management at all, because you don't have time.

Whereas, if you're an EL2, and it's a marquee piece of work for you, you do it once a month, or even once a week, then you've got the time to actually pay attention to it, and you are probably much closer to the subject material than the person who's more senior in the area. So, it decreases risk and it increases quality, and it's much better work for that person doing the work.

DAVID PEMBROKE

And now to Matt Yannopoulos.

MATT YANNOPOULOS

What I observe, is now, it's now the norm that we reach out to other agencies. And I know from a Defence context, because I've worked in it previously, that is now how we go about problem-solving.

A decade ago, we would've thought, "How will we solve the problem?" Now, we think about how we engage others. And I think that's happening service wide.

The other element, I guess, to your question is we now know that some things take time to plan for, and we've got time. We're not at crisis. We will get a better answer if we take the time to think about it, test it through an exercise, or an activity, and then refine it and take those lessons in.

DAVID PEMBROKE

And lastly, Martin Hehir, the Deputy Secretary of Governance and Corporate and Chief Operating Officer of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

MARTIN HEHIR

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. They came back through and said the changes they wanted. You knew they'd invested. It wasn't just a case of, "Martin's going to keep doing this, we might as well just do it."

And what we saw come back in, was a much stronger leadership, and higher level of satisfaction. There's different personalities always. Some people who are conflict avoiders, some people who engage with conflict, et cetera. None of those are collaboration.

And the teams practice it. I always found it odd, they did their rumbles, so they'd actually practice disagreeing with each other. So, they'd 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

Our next big topic from the year, was workplace safety and well-being, which are both essential if we are to build and sustain a thriving Australian public service.

We'll hear from Dr. Antonio Di Dio, and Matt Short from the Department of Health about stories and strategies that show how even small changes can make a big difference in protecting people and their well-being.

But first, we'll hear from Dr. Antonio Di Dio, Director at the Professional Services Review, and a GP in the Canberra suburb of Yarralumla. And he tells us a very personal story about burnout, and how to treat it.

DR ANTONIO DI DIO

Generally, it's a really deep tiredness and exhaustion that is more emotional than physical. And that tiredness is often associated with a lack of productivity, that the person themselves notices, and often others around them do.

It's also associated with what's called depersonalization and withdrawal. So, you might withdraw socially, and not talk to people as much, but you also don't see others. You see yourself looking at others. You lose motivation, you become more irritable, and the depersonalization leads to cynicism. You look at the person in front of you, and you don't see them as a customer or a client service area, or a patient, you see them as the enemy. You see them as a piece of work that needs to be done.

The first thing, of course, is to recognise and make the correct diagnosis. You can't treat something that is not what it actually is.

Setting boundaries, about doing too much, time management skills, we still keep forgetting to do that. And educating our teams, as our teams refresh and evolve, and new people don't get it.

Learning the art of delegation, perfecting work-life balance, and, very important, doing self-care and having regular breaks. Self-care is very specific and prescriptive. It's not a fluffy word. Self-care is exercise and movement, having hobbies. I play with my Captain America comics for 10 minutes. That gives me an extra week of lease of life and passion in myself. It doesn't matter how weird or strange your hobbies are, you need passions outside of work. You need to get good quality sleep. If you can't get good quality sleep, see a good quality doctor, I reckon.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Dr. Antonio Di Dio. Now, to Matt Short, who is the Assistant Secretary of Child, Youth and Priority Populations at the Department of Health and Aged Care. Matt joined us on our very first Work with Purpose Live episode.

MATTHEW SHORT

I think when we're talking about this, an event like today is really important for us to break that stigma. We talk often in our statistics about mental disorders, or mental ill health, that sometimes forgets that we all have mental health, and we need to change that conversation. And we need to start thinking about mental health, as we think about physical health, where we all have it.

So, we have some really great data, and new data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. So, the National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, which was released last year, which shows us the prevalence of mental illness in Australia, comparing it to data from 2007.

For the general population, 42.9% of people aged 16 to 85 years will have experienced a mental disorder at some time in their life. So, that's a huge statistic. Two in five. For men, it's 42.2%.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Matt Short. So, let's dive into the power of passion in the Australian public service, and how it fuels real change and transformation.

Public service is really about being deeply committed to the service of others, to embrace tough challenges with enthusiasm, and to create a

lasting impact on our communities. It's essentially why we work with, and we work for the Australian public service.

In this segment, we'll hear from a couple of inspiring leaders. First, Patrick Gorman, and then Michael Schwager who reveal how their passion drives innovation, encourages bold thinking, empowers teams, and delivers tangible outcomes for Australians.

Patrick Gorman MP, is the Assistant Minister for the public service, and Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister.

THE HON PATRICK GORMAN MP We have 170,000 Australian public servants who, every day, deliver great quality services and policy that improve the lives of all Australians. So, for that, I say to every public servant, thank you. It is an incredibly honourable career. Is one where you literally change the lives of your fellow citizens. And what we need all of our public servants to do, is to celebrate the careers and opportunities that they have in the public service and encourage the next generation of public servants.

We are in a huge competition for talent, and I want the most talented Australians to be thinking about a public service career.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Patrick Gorman. Now, some advice from Michael Schwager from episode 102. Now, Michael is the Director General at IP Australia, and in this particular clip, he discusses how to foster a culture of innovation.

MICHAEL SCHWAGER

So, the lens of innovation is applied at the individual level, but it's also applied at the strategic level, and at the whole of agency level. And when you're doing that, and when you are saying to, in this case, our excellent HR professionals, "Okay, you've got innovation in there, you're making sure our people are innovative, but what are we doing within the strategy that it is an innovative, hungry for risk approach to developing people?"

And then they start to go, "Oh, I'm empowered to go and do some crazy stuff that I never thought I'd be able to do", and off they go and do it. It's not about ticking a box, in terms of people skills. And it's not about allocating money to particular projects that are tagged innovative. It's about making sure that everyone is putting it into their daily work, and that's how it's embedded.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Michael Schwager, the Director General of IP Australia. So, thanks for sticking with us on this 2024 year in review of the Work with Purpose podcast.

So, this year we have had visionary leaders, like Dr. Kate Conroy, and Andrew Tongue, and Dr. Trish Mercer, who shared their bold ideas on ethical decision-making, collaboration and innovation in policymaking to create smarter, safer solutions for Australians.

Governance and security are the foundation of a strong and resilient public sector. In today's rapidly transforming world, how do we craft policy that addresses immediate challenges, while securing a sustainable future?

So, first of all, we'll hear from Dr. Kate Conroy, who is the lead, AI Strategy, Safety and Assurance inside the Queensland Government. And she discusses AI as it relates to automated weapons.

DR KATE CONROY

How does AI change the way we control weapons, and what we allow weapons to do, when they're out on the field? So, the process of understanding AI, some of it is actually being very clear on the way the military is structured already, and the degree to which things are constrained already.

So, where are the specific risks around the introduction of AI? Well, as Tony said, if we imagine that the particular opportunity of AI, being about achieving cognitive capabilities that are normally the remit of human beings, the ability of weapon systems to perceive their environments at a very high level of fidelity, to be able to be discerning in the way they act, but there is a particular obligation of responsibility that we need to maintain between these systems and human beings.

And that arrangement of accountability and responsibility and understanding about the way these systems operate and ensuring that they operate in accordance with human will and intent, is where a lot of the ethical conversation exists.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Dr. Kate Conroy, who has now moved onto a role with the Australian Defence Department. Next, we hear from Dr. Trish Mercer, Visiting Fellow at the Australian and New Zealand School of Government at the Australian National University, about the dynamics of policymaking.

DR TRISH MERCER

You've got to know that the problem is really well understood. And not just by the policy experts. Really understood in the community as well. Then, you've got to have a policy solution that's feasible, because otherwise governments are just never going to come. Most importantly, you've got to have political will.

So, you've got to have those three things all coming together. And so, the timing is absolutely critical. That's why things might bubble up, and you think something's going to happen, but then it all seeps away again, because Government's not prepared to take on whatever the challenge is. Too big, wrong time, maybe they'll store it away for the next election. But public servants have to be always alert to this policy window and watching out for it. But then, not get too frustrated, be resilient. It's a really tough quality, I think as a public servant.

DAVID PEMBROKE

Dr. Trish Mercer. And finally, to a great mate of mine, Andrew Tongue, who talks about strategic foresight and planning in the public service, emphasising that the need for a balance between predictable challenges and unexpected events.

ANDREW TONGUE PSM

Maybe 70 or even 80% of the future, we can predict pretty rationally right here now. And it's the 20%, where the politics is, because that's the black swan events that might come at us.

And how do you know you've got a really high performing minister, in a high functioning environment, is when the department can come and say,

"Here's what we think the next five years looks like." And basically, doing its job, and being able to say, "Here's all the pressures in these policy streams over the next five years for these reasons." And then have that open, trusting conversation about, "Well, what does this mean?"

DAVID PEMBROKE

Andrew Tongue PSM, former Deputy Secretary of Biosecurity and Compliance at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. And we could mention all of Andrew's old jobs, but we'd be here for another half an hour. A big shout-out to you, Andrew. I hope you are still enjoying that retirement, tending to that beautiful garden of yours, just outside of Canberra, and I do hope you do enjoy a very Merry Christmas.

So, to diversity. Australia is a diverse, multicultural country, and so is our public service. Yet, there are ways that the sector must become more representative, more inclusive, particularly in its upper leadership ranks.

We spoke to some trailblazers about improving representation of culturally and linguistically diverse employees in the senior executive. And how First Nations voices can get more representation into the public service. So, first of all, let's hear from Dr. Suzanne Akila.

DR SUZANNE AKILA

There are, I think, 25 different forms of cognitive bias. One of them is affinity bias. And basically, that means that we like people who remind us of us. It's pretty simple. And you look at the way that that operates in the public service, and you end up replicating forms of structural power over and over and over again.

When you think of what a diplomat is, I think people have a pretty good sense of it's usually a man. He's tall, he's got a full head of hair, he's confident, he's wearing a suit, he's usually white. These are ideas that we have, that are really deeply imbued in our culture.

And if we don't challenge the perception of what leadership is, of who can be a leader, of who can do the job, actually recruitment is going to replicate all of those problems. It will continue to replicate structures of power, and you'll have the same people doing the same thing over and over again.

So, I think, for me, it's also a question about retention. So, recruitment is one part of it, but retention is another. You have a lot of people who find... Obviously, the public service is just so different...

DAVID PEMBROKE

It's not homogenous.

DR SUZANNE AKILA

There are different organisational cultures within, and subcultures within every organisation, so it's hard to generalise. But there are places where it doesn't feel particularly welcoming, or people don't feel seen. They don't have that visibility of who they are. That's not just for cold people, that's also LGBTIQ people.

So, I think it's really about lifting the lid on that stuff. It's going to be uncomfortable. And unless people are prepared to have some pretty uncomfortable conversations, nothing's going to change.

DAVID PEMBROKE

That was Susan Akila, who is the Special Advisor of the Greater Sunrise Timor-Leste branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. And she's speaking there about bias, and uncomfortable conversations.

So, now to Stella Ragani on integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the operations and decision-making processes of the Australian public service.

STELLA RENAGI

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's voices being heard and considered as part of APS business as usual. Things like our highest committee through the coup.

I guess, for me also, the exposure through coup, across the public service, provided a different view of perhaps the objectives across government for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Not just for employment, but the services that we provide to our community.

I also really feel culturally safe in an environment, to express some of the challenges and the opportunities, but also flesh out some of those unintentional consequences of our good intentions as government.

Also, building that collective understanding of how we can work together, as one APS, to deliver better services that align to closing the gap.

The other part, for me, was the cross-cultural exchange and immersion. That really built the coup's capability in perhaps realising beyond what their reality might be, day to day, as senior executives, and some of the more grassroots challenges that we're seeing, as not only staff, but as recipients of some of these services.

DAVID PEMBROKE
Office.

Stella Renagi, a business strategy manager at the Australian Taxation

So, there you go. The 2024 Work with Purpose year in review. And I do hope you enjoyed some of the memories of a wonderful year that we've had, covering so many interesting topics, from exploring human-centred design, to navigating leadership under pressure, workplace well-being, the passion for the public service, and really that critical intersection of governance and security, and supporting diversity and inclusion.

And a big thanks to all of our guests, who gave up some of their very valuable time and their attention, to come and join us to have these conversations, which we know you, as the audience, really rate and you really enjoy.

And it's so pleasing to know that the Work with Purpose podcast is IPAA ACT's most popular form of communication. So, thank you very much for that great support that we found out about, again, in this year's survey.

And please stay involved, get involved, give us your ideas, connect with the content on LinkedIn, and just be a part of it, because there is so much more to come.

So, a great big thanks to you, the audience, for tuning in, and engaging with these conversations. So, you can tune into past episodes of Work with Purpose, Spotify, Apple Podcast, wherever you do get your podcasts from. And just remember, if you do have time, for a rating or a review of the program. And we have had so many fantastic ratings and commentary this

year. A big thanks to everyone who's taken the time. It doesn't take long, but it helps the program to be found by more people.

And if you do want to stay in contact with Work with Purpose, our main channel of communication with you is through LinkedIn. So, you can follow Work with Purpose APS, and IPAA ACT on LinkedIn to stay up to date on all things Work with Purpose.

Work with Purpose is produced as a collaboration between contentgroup, and the Institute of Public Administration ACT. And supported, as always, by our good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission.

We'll be back next year with more insights, more stories, more people, and more ways to support the Australian public sector in delivering for all Australians.

We'll now switch to our holiday programming, where we're going to be revisiting some of our most popular episodes of 2024 in the coming weeks. So, we won't be disappearing entirely, but we will be having a holiday. I'm, in fact, going with my family to Europe for five weeks. So, bags be me. That's going to be so much fun. But I do hope that you also have a wonderful, restful holiday season, and you do take care of yourselves. And we really look forward to seeing you again in 2025. My name is David Pembroke and its bye for now.

VOICE OVER:

Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup, in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.