



**CHRIS THOMAS**

BRINGING PEOPLE ON THE JOURNEY

**LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**



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**EPISODE 18**



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**MURRAY:** A question for you. Have you had the discussion about organ donation with those you love? Listen to Chris Thomas share his leadership moments and explain why that conversation can save a life.

Welcome to my podcast. I'm Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments, real people stories about the people and the moments that have influenced and shaped their leadership.

Today we are entering the world of associations and talking with an old friend of mine, Chris Thomas. Chris has over 30 years experience in representing healthcare and member associations. For the last 10 years Chris has been CEO of Transplant Australia, a national charity promoting organ and tissue donation and caring for people with a life-saving transplant. In his first year on the job Australia hosted the World Transplant Games in Australia and now Chris is president for the World Transplant Games Federation.

Chris, welcome.

**CHRIS:** Great to see you, Murray.

**MURRAY:** Great to have you with us today. Before we get into the questions it would be really good for our listeners if you could tell us a bit about Transplant Australia and your role as CEO.

**CHRIS:** We're a national charity promoting organ and tissue donation, looking after people that have had an organ transplant. There are around 1600 people in Australia at any one time waiting for a phone call that will save their lives that developed what we call end stage organ failure. So they've got a terminal illness. The only way to save that person's life is with really radical surgery. They're going to take out their lungs and they're going to put another set of lungs into that person or a heart or a liver or a kidney, whatever the case may be. We've had some major advances in medical technology across the world, but in Australia and in particular the last 50 years, we're doing things that we'd never thought were possible. But in this one area of medicine, there's this unknown quantity, this extra ingredient which makes it possible and that's the decision by a family out there somewhere to donate their loved one's organs upon that person's death. Or maybe that person has actually thought about organ and tissue donation and signed on to the Australian Organ Donor Register. So without that extra ingredient, that wonderful generosity called the gift of life, none of this goes ahead. Fortunately, in Australia over the last 10 years, we've been part of a really successful increase in organ donation in this country. You know, if we were



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doing this interview eight years ago, I'd tell you that last year we had about 200 organ donors and about 600 people's lives were saved. Fast forward to 2016 and there were 503 organ donors saving the lives of 1447 people. So the reform program that the government has introduced has been very successful. Success has many fathers, of course, but I can honestly say that Transplant Australia has been a very true and supportive advocacy body to see those donation rates increase and we're so pleased that there's probably an extra 4000 or 5000 Australians alive today who wouldn't be alive without that reform program. So it's the great success that Australia has seen and we're pleased to have been a small part of that.

**MURRAY:** You talk about 1600 a year people waiting. There is still a shortfall in terms of donations? So there are still people disappointed at the end of the year?

**CHRIS:** Not only disappointed. Probably about 50–70 people die each year waiting for a transplant. The list is sort of kept out officially low. There'd been many... if we were able to triple our rate of donation in Australia, you'd still have about a thousand people on the list because you've got about 20,000 people waiting for a kidney. They're on dialysis.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** And in the current situation there is no foreseeable opportunity for some of those people to get a transplant. You know, they might have other comorbidity, some health conditions. They might be in a significantly older part of the population. However, if you were able to get all the young people and all the people who sort of come to the top of the list, you know, kidneys then you'd find that the next rung of people would be able to benefit as well. So you will never reduce the list to zero. We'll probably maximize the opportunity when we're achieving 750 donors a year. So it's this ongoing journey of improvements and really there are two significant areas of improvements that we've had to work on. They're both culturally based. One is the culture within the hospital system. So getting organ donation to be the most obvious question that the intensivists and the nursing care staff ask when they see a patient who could potentially be a donor. Often we were missing potential donors previously. It's a really fascinating area for an intensivist working in one of the major teaching hospitals in the intensive care unit. They are there to prolong life, to save life and to get them to actually turn their thinking to, "Hang on, this person may be useful for other people," is a seismic shift in their thinking. So that's where that cultural change of behaviour has had to take place. The second barrier, of course, is out in the public. We have a multicultural society with people from many different nations and one of the things that we have come to realize is that people bring their organ donation rate with them when they move to a new country. So if you come from the



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Philippines or from China, from some other parts of Asia where organ donation is not as reputable as we would like it to be, it takes a generation or two to actually break down those barriers. So we've had a major piece of work in terms of encouraging all Australians to understand the benefits of donation, to know that they indeed may need a transplant themselves one day. For example, only about 4% of Australians from an Asian background donate, but 16% of Australians with an Asian background are waiting for a kidney transplant. So there's this imbalance occurring. So we have been quite successful in getting a lot more cultural acceptance of organ donation. But the number one barrier or challenge we've faced really is... it's not cultural, it's not religious, it's apathy and that's just... We're a happy go lucky society and we enjoy life and we don't think about our own mortality. Have we talked about organ donation with our family? Well, no, because we're out there enjoying the Australian sun and surf.

**MURRAY:** So one of your key measurements must be not so much the number of donations a year but actually the number of people who registered.

**CHRIS:** Yeah.

**MURRAY:** With the national database. How has that changed in the last ten years?

**CHRIS:** That's probably been one of the biggest frustrations in terms of... It's a very complex federal government arrangement. So we've spent too long trying to introduce a simpler way of getting people to register. Fortunately, the Organ and Tissue Authority has now introduced a simplified registration form online where you can sign up in less than a minute. That's made some significant changes, but still we're lagging behind increasing the rate of registration and we know that... where someone has registered as an organ donor, the consent rate is 91%. If you've never discussed it, if you haven't registered, that drops to 50%.

**MURRAY:** So for anyone listening, the message obviously is discuss it with the family what happens in the event of that unthinkable accident, but have the discussion and sign up. And if someone is listening and hasn't signed up, where do they go to actually sign up?

**CHRIS:** They should go to [donatelife.gov.au](http://donatelife.gov.au) and you can sign up in less than a minute.

**MURRAY:** Great. And we'll put that link in the show notes so people can go there and click through.



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**CHRIS:** Great.

**MURRAY:** So interesting, obviously really important work and probably a good time now, Chris, to ask you about your career and how you developed to where you are. Because I know that you started as a journalist in Tamworth in country in New South Wales. It would be good to get a bit of a description of your journey from journalist now to CEO of such an important organization.

**CHRIS:** My role really came full circle because when I was journalist in Tamworth back in '83/'84 I rang up the ambulance station one day as you do when you're on the rounds, you're ringing up the police, the ambulance, fire, you know, what's happening? Any potential stories out there? And the ambulance officer said to me, "We have a Christiaan Barnard type of case going down to Sydney. So vaguely in the back of my mind, "Who is Christiaan Barnard?" You know and so... not like if we had Google, but how would I have researched him back then, Murray. I have no idea. Then I found out that Christiaan Barnard conducted the first successful heart transplant in South Africa. And so I tried to chase up this story and unfortunately... I thought I was going to get a world exclusive, you know, in St. Vincent's they had a heart transplantation, but the gentleman who needed the transplant actually then had it overnight and the story broke in Sydney the next morning. Following my journalism career in Tamworth, I became the medical reporter of the Sydney Morning Herald. So my medical links became very established and that became my strong interest. Then work with the Australian Medical Association, the National Heart Foundation. All of a sudden I woke up one day and I'm... oh no, I became an industry association person. I hadn't planned it. But when the role came up for Transplant Australia I saw almost, you know, the world turning full circle back to those early days and I had been working with the Advertising Federation of Australia, a great organization. But helping advertising agencies, to state their case was probably not totally within my sort of core existence of what I wanted to do and I felt there was an opportunity to help a group of people and I took the role on in Transplant Australia and coming close to 11 years later I'm still here.

**MURRAY:** You're still here. That's great.

**CHRIS:** And enjoying it.

**MURRAY:** I think lesson there is really about finding work that you're passionate about and connected with that's so important and you've been fortunate to do that.



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But yeah, a really big thing.

First question from these three questions. Who would you say has influenced you the most in your career?

**CHRIS:** You really want to grab some, you know, some world celebrity. You know, you throw in a Nelson Mandela or Pope John Paul II, I think to answer that question honestly. I've had a couple of bosses in the newspaper industry and subsequently and for the sake of niceness I won't delve into it in any more detail, but I simply looked at their behaviour and the way that they operated and said... I sort of stored up that behaviour and I said to myself, "Okay, if I ever get into that role that's exactly the way I won't behave." And I feel that I've learned much more from what I would call inappropriate, fly off the handle behaviour that didn't take the team with them, far more telling and far more inspirational almost than one person out there who really inspired me. I mean if I had to nominate someone, Eric Beecher, who used to be the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald. He was a great man and employed me into the Sydney Morning Herald from the Daily Telegraph. So I went from a tabloid to a broadsheet masthead. And for journalists back in those days that was a very difficult transition. You know, you were just a daily tabloid journalist and all of a sudden you became a serious journalist. And he took a punt on me and picked me up. I paid him back through some of the work that I did. But it's the people who pull the team together. As the CEO, to review a new logo and the CEO says, "I'll have the one on the left," and walk out of the room and the marketing staff, the communication staff, who might have all had their own opinions, are left there going, "Well, thanks. I really feel valued for that." They're the people that I probably learned more from. So when I'm meeting with staff and sometimes you got to make the tough call, but I think the successful CEO's let everybody else come to the conclusion or can convince you that that's the right way to go. Then why take that leadership role when it ends up devaluing the staff and their opinions.

**MURRAY:** The great reminder that often it's the people who set the bad example we can learn the most from. So if you think about your leadership philosophy... and you've touched on it about making people feel valued. How would you sum it up?

**CHRIS:** Patience.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** Would be a key word. Being able to really see the best in people and give them the time to develop their skills. Some of the people I've worked with over the



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last 20 years would never have survived in the cut and thrust newspaper world. But, some of the greatest successes I've had are people who I thought were a bit... they just not get the job done, but giving them time, giving them gentle persuasion, gentle guidance, seeing them come to the fore sounds like a fairly generic sort of thing to say, but especially with my world role now, you do need to lead by example because you've got such a diverse group of people looking for that inspiration and looking for that leadership.

**MURRAY:** You talked about... you outlined the work you do as an organization. You talked about some of those challenges, getting people to sign up, working through the different communities and each one having a different view as well as internally in the medical system. As a CEO in your organization plus, I would imagine, you're fighting for funding and the attention if you like because there are other organizations doing similar sort of work. How do you approach that as a CEO?

**CHRIS:** I'm very good at managing upwards into government as an advocacy body into funding agencies. The challenge really for me has been also the managing down, bringing people with me along the journey and in a sense that probably alludes to one of the questions you ask in terms of the failures that you have. And I think my biggest failure that I remember back to is the... when I was working in the Australian Medical Association, we had a young lady by the name of Anna Wood who passed away from an ecstasy overdose. I got to know the family very well and we developed a drug and alcohol education project under the banner of the Australian Medical Association. And I had drug and alcoholic experts, world authorities coming to me saying, "This is the most amazing thing that we've ever seen the Australian Medical Association do." And I threw my whole passion and existence into this new project and it was absolutely light years ahead of where the AMA had previously been. Tuesday night, 7:30 one night, going to an executive meeting of the AMA and the president sits me down and tears strips off me. "What are we doing in this space when we've got GPs who can't even afford to pay their secretaries? We've got doctors going out of business. We have no place for this." And it was a real... well basically with your questions, it was an 'aha' moment.

**MURRAY:** [laughter] That's so... answering everything at once, Chris.

**CHRIS:** Because I just walked out absolutely dumbfounded that they didn't get it and I was furious that they didn't get it. But then I realized that, over a period of time, this slow 'aha' moment doesn't happen automatically that I didn't take them with me on the journey and I was way out ahead without making sure that the executive who was





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actually paying my salary was supportive of what we were doing. And so my biggest failure would be an assumption that everyone would just get the vision that Chris creates.

**MURRAY:** Yeah, and I think many people might, and I know I can relate to that and, you know, they don't get it. They don't understand, but of course, we don't communicate it and that's so important, communicating. I think also more than communication is really understanding how they see it and where they're sitting and stepping into their shoes on a particular issue because we can get in such a hurry we miss it and it all falls apart later.

**CHRIS:** My biggest, my biggest challenge or potential failure point really is around creating the vision, creating the picture and then moving on to the next project without actually seeing it through towards completion.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** I remember Julia Gillard when she was the Prime Minister of Australia announced that they were going to set up a National Disability Insurance Scheme. Everyone went, "Oh, thank God. Fantastic." And she outlined this program of setting up the disability scheme. And then the next week she talked about her government's proudest achievements. One of the proudest achievements was the fact that they had set up the National Disability Insurance Scheme. At that stage it was still just an idea.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** So it's really important that if you come up with an idea that you execute it correctly. Fortunately, at the World Transplant Games Federation... you know, I took on the presidency of an organization that was... been doing the same thing the same way for a long period of time and so they... I suppose I'm a transition president into a new era and we've implemented an international Fit for Life program. If you think of transplant recipients going to the World Transplant Games, these are the elite, the top people in the pyramid if you think of all those transplant recipients across the world out there. But we weren't addressing the base of the pyramid. The people that come out of a transplant have this fear of movement. Murray, we've just given you a new heart. Now what can you do with that? Can I walk? Can I run, you know? Can I have all those intimacy issues that I used to have? Can I climb to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro? So we were addressing the pinnacle, but not the base. And so this new Fit for Life program I've introduced has been extremely successful and is attracting quite a lot of sponsors. But coming up with that idea was all well and good to have it,





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but I needed a good executive manager who is a lady based in Durban in South Africa who is a wonderful event manager who knows how to execute, knows how to pick up the pieces of the ideas that, you know, that I'll have. So there's pure teamwork in there and me painting a vision and someone coming through and seeing that it grew to fruition and questioning it. So yeah, one of the challenges I have is that I'll paint this Utopia, but how we get to that Utopia is another...

**MURRAY:** Someone else picks up the pieces and...

**CHRIS:** It's another challenge.

**MURRAY:** But I think that's so important in all teams that you have the people who can do the vision and the strength of the leaders to throw in themselves with the people who then can take those pieces. And if people are committed and involved, they do it and it works out. And it sounds like you've got those people in place.

**CHRIS:** You talk also about working with other people. I think one of my 'aha' moments and one of my favorite sayings is that someone just didn't pick up this behaviour overnight so if you've got someone who is frustrating, who isn't playing along, who is proving difficult, who'll not be playing the part, you know, I've slowly come to the conclusion that they probably didn't develop that behaviour overnight. They probably always been like that. And that helps me in a sense when you've got this conflict going on with someone. It helps me to sort of take a more of a helicopter view and go, well hang on this is not just about me. versus it's them and the fact that they won't do this particular thing. It's a simple out for me in a sense to say, "Well they probably always been like that. They probably always been difficult and I'm just the latest... I'm just the latest hurdle they have."

**MURRAY:** That's one way of looking at it. Yeah.

**CHRIS:** Well it's a practical way of looking at it.

**MURRAY:** Because there's always... I think for people, there's always a question when you have a person who is challenging, let's use the phrase challenging. It's what do I want of this? What am I doing that's creating potentially that reaction? So that there's something we all own about how someone reacts to us in that we do something that sets reaction off. Obviously their reaction is their choice, but what are we doing leading up to it? And I think the other thing I'm learning as I go along is where you see someone behaving and it's not working or it's not fitting in, there's often a story behind the story. That's the sign of either something internally or in the bigger picture



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that's going wrong and all they are... They're the early warning sign. There's a message in there for us. So it's not about them personally. It's something else that's coming through them and there's a real opportunity to actually find out...

**CHRIS:** You have to know the back story.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** And you can't just be making assumptions. A close colleague of mine recently was frustrated with their chairman over a contractual issue and it was bogging down, bogging down, bogging down and then they found out the reason why it was bogging down is because their chairman just died.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** Now that's the...

**MURRAY:** Yeah. That's it.

**CHRIS:** That's the ultimate, but no one knew that the chap had cancer.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** And he was becoming really frustrating and wouldn't progress, wouldn't respond.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** And you can easily say, you know, "He's the chairman. He's got some responsibilities. What's he doing?" But in this instance, you know, the back story was really tragic.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**CHRIS:** A really tragic one. It's interesting dealing with people isn't it about... you know, if you give someone a task... and because don't forget, at the World Transplant Games Federation we're all volunteers, you know.

**MURRAY:** Yes.



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**CHRIS:** That often think, "Why don't people do something when you ask them to do it?" And you know, I've sort of... I can't remember now if I've narrowed it down to three or four. One, they don't have time. Two, they hate your guts and they don't want to do it, but three and the most probable one, is they just don't get what you're asking and I think so many times, we ask someone to do something, but we don't explain it properly and if we just had taken the time to say to them at the end of the request, "Do you get what I'm asking for?" We've got 12 other board members across the world and you've got to make sure your messages are conveyed really well. Hopefully none of those fall into category number two, but I think more often than not it's that people don't actually understand what you're asking them to do.

**MURRAY:** That's a big part of it. They don't understand what it is you want and often they don't understand the why. Why is this important? So often, "Just do this." But why is it important? And as soon as people can connect to the why it changes it. In some of the work I do we talk about creating the conditions for success and connecting with the why and purpose is a big part of it. But often it can be... yeah they know what needs to be done, but they actually don't have the system or process to do it or they might not even have the skills or experience to do it or the culture around them won't allow it. So there's multiple facets, but often it's, "This guy's got a bad attitude. He hasn't done what I want him to do." And it goes back to what I was saying earlier. That person not doing it can be an indicator there is something else wrong in the system and not working.

I've got one more question. I just thought and I've got to do it and we'll see whether we use it in the recording or not.

**CHRIS:** Go for it.

**MURRAY:** You cycled from Perth to Sydney on your own. Here is an open question. What was that all about and what did you get out of it?

**CHRIS:** So I suppose what I got out of it was a better appreciation of life and the fact that... Guess what? This ain't a dress rehearsal. You'll only be 50 once. You'll only be 51 once and you need to make the most of everything that you do. The ride demonstrated to me that I had reserves of energy that I never thought were possible. To ride 180 K's one day and then back up and do 140 K's the next day in extreme heat through South Australia just really demonstrated something that I never knew that I had within. The ride came about because when I was 16 I foolishly opened an atlas and looked at the back of Australia and I used to enjoy a little bit of cycling and I said to myself, "Yeah I'm going to ride across Australia." And I think I might have mentioned



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it to my parents. You know, I turned 21. I was deeply involved in my journalism career. I turned 25. I was getting married. I turned 30. I had children, 40 we had a mortgage. And I hit 50 and I thought, "Wow. Unless I do this soon, this just won't happen." So it was extremely satisfying and just totally a different existence. You know, to just have nothing else to do but to ride, to free your mind up, but also to cope with the loneliness and the isolation. People said to me that would be my biggest challenge, that I wouldn't be able to cope with that. But I really embraced that. I'm a person who is very comfortable with my own existence and with my own company. It was a fascinating experience and I certainly learned a lot about my inner self.

**MURRAY:** If you summed up everything you just recounted today and what you learned, what advice would you give to someone out of that, you know, you would pass on to them from your learning?

**CHRIS:** Always stay out of your comfort zone. Always try new things and I think people around you will have a greater appreciation for you. They'll have a greater respect and admiration if they do see that you're doing different things and you're challenging yourself constantly and I think that just contributes to a more rounded executive who can lead with different experiences.

**MURRAY:** I think there's a couple of things. I love what you say about discovering you had this reserve of energy you didn't know you had and I think actually everyone's got that, but we just have to tap into it. The other piece certainly is staying out of your comfort zone. Often, I do this as well, we hold ourselves back because we worry about being stupid and looking stupid and what other people think. But it's always the reverse. You do it. People admire you and respect you and support you. So just do it. Have a go.

**CHRIS:** Sounds like a Nike Ad

**MURRAY:** Yeah. That's it.

**CHRIS:** Good way to finish.

**MURRAY:** Good way to finish. Chris Thomas, thank you very much.

**CHRIS:** Thank you, Murray.



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**MURRAY:** Thanks to Chris for that insight to the importance of organ donation in Australia and the challenges faced and what a great reminder that it's not enough to have the vision. You have to put in the work to take the people with you. On a final note, if you've not registered to donate, I encourage you to have the conversation with those close to you and go to [donatelife.gov.au](http://donatelife.gov.au) and register today. You never know. You may save a life one day.

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. Head to [murraywright.com](http://murraywright.com) for the transcripts, key learnings and resources from today's and past episodes. Once you're there why not subscribe to the Leadership Moments podcast. That way you never have to miss one. Until the next time.

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