



LEE WILLIAMS

WHAT'S YOUR PURPOSE?

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 23



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[Start of Transcription]

MURRAY: Hi there. What's the impact you are having today? What's the impact you want to have and if there's a gap, what can you do differently?

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.

I'm delighted to welcome fellow coach and facilitator Lee Williams to the podcast today. Lee is director of Infinity Leadership.

Lee, welcome.

LEE: Thanks Murray. It's a pleasure to be here.

MURRAY: Great to have you. Now Lee, you do a lot of work in leadership development, in particular in culture change and purpose. What drew you to the work?

LEE: If you had asked me, what, maybe 20 years ago, what's your purpose, I would have said, "Go away, that's a ridiculous question to ask." I'd never really considered that a meaningful questions, to be honest. But about... When would it have been? Around about 2007 I attended a leadership program that really started to ask me some tough questions about who I was and more importantly, who I wanted to become and over about 18 months, I'll tell you a bit more about that maybe later, I really just started to explore that question and realized that life is short and we've got a lot of opportunity, we've got gifts that we can share, there are people around us that we care about and I could drift through, as I had up until 2007, bouncing from one job to the next and so on without really thinking about it or I can start to make choices and start to think about what is it that I could do with these gifts that I have, with this experience that I've got and what kind of impact I want to have. And that really started to change the way I viewed my profession. It changed the way I viewed the way I'm going to live my life. So I think having somebody else ask me those questions and challenge my thinking made me realize how beneficial that was to explore those questions and therefore that's what's moved me towards doing that for other people now.

MURRAY: Is this the piece that drew you to the leadership... having gone through a bit of that deep self-reflection and I suppose honesty session with yourself? Is this what then said, "Now I want to do this for other people," or was there anything else that you found as you were looking down into yourself?



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LEE: So before... My career history, without giving you the full CV, I guess I just did jobs because I could do them. I was an accountant, then I went to software development and I never really planned any of that. I just moved into different positions. I ended up in a leadership position and when I went on this program I got some feedback. I wasn't very satisfied with the way I was leading and I think that really made me think about, "Well what is the impact that I could have and want to have," and start to wonder about this thing leadership, what is it about and realizing that actually it's quite a big responsibility. Everybody who you work with goes home and talks about their working day and they have between eight and fifteen hours, depending and your job, at work. It's a big chunk of people's time and leaders have a dramatic impact on that time. So I see it now as a privilege and a responsibility. What kind of conversation do you want people to be having about you when they go home? What's the ripple effect of that conversation? Do you want them going home happy and energetic and talking to their wives and husbands and sons and daughters and friends about the achievements and the great boss that they've got or do you want them going home, which sadly also often happens, with complaining and stress and frustration and worry. Leaders have a significant impact on people's minds because of that.

MURRAY: Absolutely. There are a lot of cats being kicked.

LEE: Yes.

MURRAY: That's what I would say.

So probably, it's time to ask that first question, the Leadership Moments question and you've made your way here from England, the UK?

LEE: Yeah.

MURRAY: Born in Liverpool?

LEE: Yeah.

MURRAY: So in your journey who would you say has influenced you the most in your career.

LEE: I'm going to be cheating and saying two people if that's all right?



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MURRAY: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LEE: The first person that really needs to be called out is my brother. For whatever reason when I was quite young, maybe 14, 15 years old, my brother is four years older, we used to do karate together. We trained a lot together and so on. At about 18, 19 years old, in fact a couple of years earlier than that, but significantly at that time, there was a lot going on at home, a lot of challenges in the home environment leading up to a separation and so on with my parents. At a time when most 18-year-olds would probably be distancing themselves and creating their own life, my brother decided to take me under his wing. He got paid a very little amount of money for teaching karate. He used to spend that money on me, you know, going for a pizza and talking to me and really stimulating curiosity in my mind. We'd talk about science and nature and... But more than that when I look back on that now, that gave me an oasis at a very challenging time, at a very important part of my life in those teenage years when it all could have gone wrong. And that's one of the things, to your earlier question, that now informs why I do what I do. There are various people in my life who have intervened, who took the time to care and that's made all the difference for me. So the reason I do what I do now is to be one of those people who can invest and care and hopefully help people to live a more enriched life because of that. So that's one personal in the perspective. And then another... There have been many influences, but I'd like to talk about early career experience.

So the first really influential leader that I had is a guy called Bob Gorman and he's a really lovely man, interesting character and fair to say probably not the leadership style that I would advocate in fact today. But some of it was incredibly valuable. He's kind of a military background, military style of leadership, but one of the things... I'll give you an example. He used to say... If you took a problem to Bob, I was software developing at the time, so if I got stuck, I'd take the problem to Bob. I'll say, "I can't figure this out." His immediate response would be, "Try harder." Right? At first it was quite, "Oh really? You're not going to help me with this?" But then what would you do? You'd go away. You'd try harder and sure enough you'd end up solving it. Right? Because of his commitment to his work, he did care a lot even though he was quite harsh. There was a lot of swearing in that role. He was quite a directive leader at times, but he was also incredibly empowering. Through that and other approaches that he had, I developed confidence in myself and that was the first time in my life that I really thought, "You know what? This job can actually be a real source of satisfaction and achievement and you can grow and develop and gain a lot." That was pretty tough gig. The other thing that he used to do which is quite an interesting and a lesson for me was he did team building activities. They'd often be outdoors. We'd cover 85 miles cross country as a relay team with bikes and running and so on and I



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remember distinctly you're in the rain in the middle of a field in Salisbury somewhere and realizing that the only way out of this is to move forward and there's no one coming to get you. So this sense of, it's my job to get through this. I can take another step and I'm going to take another step because that's actually the only option that I've got if I want to rest at the end of it. So that attitude and process and culture has really helped me to be resilient, self-sufficient and determined. But as I say, I think there are aspects of that style of leadership that I would advocate today and there are aspects of it that I wouldn't.

MURRAY: Absolutely. I think the elements you advocate today are probably delivered and done in a different way today. There is still that... You're going to hold people accountable, "You come up with the answer," but it will be done in a slightly different way.

LEE: Yes. "Try harder," probably in a different kind of language.

MURRAY: Yes. The language will change, but I think the intent is there.

LEE: One more thing about Bob, just to kind of... One of the things that... I saw him take on an awful lot of stress and pressure as the leader and I see that a lot in the work that I do now and I think one of the things that I would advocate for leaders now is to make sure they're getting that investment in self and making sure that they are looking after themselves.

MURRAY: Yeah. I think that's it. It's the old aircraft, take the oxygen mask and look after yourself first. You can't help anybody if you're not well and people have to do it definitely. It's a good point.

Just a reminder, send me your leadership moments and we'll share the learning and insights in future episodes. All are welcome, the serious, the amusing, the weird and wonderful. Whatever you've got, share it with us. Simply follow the link to your leadership moments in the Show Notes or find it on the podcast page murraywright.com.au.

Now back to our guest.

So talking of resilience and being able to take a step forward getting through things, the largest program you are currently working on is The United Nations World Food



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Programme and part of that, the leading phrase Zero Hunger. Can you tell us a bit about that work?

LEE: So the World Food Programme is dedicated to food security globally. There are currently 800 million people in the world who go to bed hungry every day. So their mandate is to end hunger by 2030 and there are some conversations right now. The executive director of the World Food Programme now, if you look him up and see him speak, he will say that that is not going to happen unless we eliminate conflict. For the first time in many many years the number of hungry people in the world is actually increasing and that's because there are so many conflicts, manmade conflicts, going on.

So this organization is dedicated to ensure the food security firstly the most vulnerable people in the world. So one of their mantras is to save lives, change lives and feed dreams. Alright, so saving lives first... Who is the most at risk? Let's help those people with a secure food supply. Changing lives... How do we invest in ways that are sustainable? So it's not just... We don't need to be donating food all the time to keep propping people up, but that's a mechanism to get them into a position where they can change their lives, change their opportunities, take advantage of education and so on. Then finally how do we help people fulfill their full potential in the world? We can end hunger... If you think about... One of the lessons for me, I hadn't really considered the importance of food security growing up in... I've never been hungry. I haven't been well off in my earlier life, but I've never been hungry and when you start to get exposed to that you realize just how important that is. If you and I couldn't feed our kids, you're not thinking about educating them. You're not going to think about what school you're going to send them to. Your whole time and energy is dedicated to keeping your family alive. So as soon as that food security issue is resolved that has a massive impact on people, people's ability to improve their lives.

MURRAY: Right, and they can actually start thinking about that.

LEE: Yeah. So as an organization that's what they're focused on and the program where we're facilitating, we've helped to shape and design, is about taking senior leaders in that organization, mid to senior level leaders and helping them to become more effective in their leadership so that they can serve their beneficiaries more effectively.

MURRAY: So you've had to travel the world.

LEE: Yes.



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MURRAY: You've been to some really interesting places, tough places and as you say, you've never had to think about this whole scheme of things and the people in these countries and what it takes to feed them. What did you learn from doing that work?

LEE: A couple of things. Number one, all of the different cultures that I have been exposed to... Often I hear conversations about culture, the importance of understanding different cultures and so on and that's absolutely true, but actually a lot of the work that we do with them, we do get to acquire a deep level of understanding of the people in the room and you realize that no matter where you are in the world we're all trying to do the same stuff. We're all trying to look after the people that we care about and to be valuable in some way, to have some kind of satisfaction in life. There's more shared experience than there is difference, is the first thing that I've realized. The cultural rules and norms and stuff sit on top of that, the different ways of satisfying those basic human needs. So we're all the same with a different approach.

MURRAY: Yeah. Yeah.

LEE: The second thing that really strikes me is scale and obviously when you think about 800 million people in the world who are going to bed hungry, the scale of that is massive. There are many many people affected by the work of that organization. I'll give you an example. Between having the first phone call about this piece of work, I'm instantly... I know you had a conversation with Rob Metcalf... I took the phone call from The World Food Programme through a contact that somebody just referred me to them. I took the phone call and we talked about this program and I put the phone down I thought, "This is the biggest thing that I could ever have been involved in," and I was panicking about it. Right? The first person I called was Rob Metcalf and I said... He's a good mentor of mine, a good friend of mine and I downloaded all this stuff, "Hey this, I've had this phone call. This thing is looking like, you know, they want a proposal from me and dah dah dah. Here are all my worries and concerns." And he said to me, "Well you could take something stressful and make it fun, Lee." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Put a team together. I'll do it with you." So there I am eight weeks later on the way to Senegal, West Africa to deliver a program with a French speaking facilitator, a good friend of mine now, Francoise Faure. He's an exceptional facilitator. The first night I sat at the dinner table, mostly French speaking, so I'm feeling a bit lonely and this beautiful lady, Constance, sits next to me and I said, "What's your role?" Up until this point I didn't know an awful lot about that organization and she says, "I lead the school feeding program for West Africa." I said, "Okay tell me about that." "We send food to schools so the kids get sent to



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be educated." I said, "I see. How many countries do you look at?" She said 19. I said, "Wow. Okay. That's quite big. How many kids are getting fed at school as a result of this program?" She said, "Three million."

MURRAY: Wow.

LEE: That was one of 30 people in the room. I nearly fell off my chair and that to me really hit home. The scale of impact that effective leadership can have. Obviously that's a really meaningful and direct example of leadership impact. So if Constance, and I'm sure she is. She was an exceptional leader to start with, but if through our time with her she got 10% better, 10% more effective, maybe 20% more effective, that's a massive impact on people. So for me the learning, one of the realizations, if you like, is just how important it is to get effective leaders in this world.

MURRAY: Yeah.

LEE: Because the scale is... The scalability of effective leadership is massive.

MURRAY: It is. I think I would now like to get though, in that conversation with Rob, is that you're not on your own.

LEE: Yes.

MURRAY: Sometimes we put ourselves in the position we think we're on our own and we think we have to have all the answers when actually there's help there and all you've got to do is ask.

LEE: Yes. I think as a leader you're inherently... If you are choosing to lead as effectively as you can, you have to embrace vulnerability. It's inherent in the definition. You're adopting a position when you're leading that maybe others are going to judge and point at and disapprove of and people often say 'to get comfortable with'. I don't think you ever get comfortable with it. I think you just... I think it's more of an acceptance, that if I'm leading I'm going to be at the edge sometimes and I'm going to feel a bit at risk. I don't think that's ever going to go away. I don't think you can reach a stage in life where you don't feel at risk and if you are, then I know you're probably not pushing the edge of your leadership.

MURRAY: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Growth is in the discomfort.



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LEE: Yeah.

MURRAY: So you talk about some insights there. What have you learned about yourself in doing this work?

LEE: One of the pieces of feedback that I got was leaders are often combative in meetings. Right? So the strategies that I had growing up in Liverpool of stay concealed, don't stand out, don't look different, sound different, have a point of view because to do so, growing up in the Northwest of England at that time at home and at school, was a dangerous thing to do. Right?

MURRAY: Yes.

LEE: Much better to blend in and then if you can't blend in any more, come out swinging.

MURRAY: Yeah.

LEE: Okay? Now that defined my leadership style and I mentioned Bob Gorman earlier, that he helped me come out of the compliance side of that, but to some degree he probably cultivated the come out swinging side.

MURRAY: Swinging side.

LEE: What I learned about myself through that process over 18 months is that there are habits and ways of thinking and feeling that I built up that have worked for me in the past that were not working for me as a leader in an organization in Australia many years later and those being competitive, but also being passive. So passive, passive, passive and then coming out with power and realizing that that was seriously impacting my effectiveness. This largely informs the way I go about my facilitation work now is really helping people to see themselves clearly. These are the patterns that we all have that at some point have worked in life and they should be accepted not critiqued, but at some point... It comes to a point in your life where that is no longer useful and it's limiting in some way. To be able to see that, create a bit of a space and make a choice in line with purpose is the impact that I want to have rather than this is the impact that I'm having by accident because of some history.

MURRAY: Yeah. I think the history piece is interesting. I've learned something of late which is... Actually the intent of our inner self at that moment, that other part of us that suddenly appears, is to keep us safe.



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LEE: Yeah.

MURRAY: And if you can actually just have a chat with that part of you and say, "No. It's okay. I'm safe here. I don't need you right now." Suddenly it can actually start to calm things down and create the space for the more constructive and making decent choices.

LEE: Absolutely.

MURRAY: That's good.

So it brings us to our second question. I don't know if you've already answered it, but was there a moment when you suddenly understood what leadership was all about? So what was your 'aha' moment around leadership?

LEE: I think the scale moment. Just sitting next to Constance was an 'aha' moment around the impact of effective leadership. The realization about all of the many different ways that we get in our own way in these belief structures that we form, again, which are really really helpful is what 'aha' moments around that, which I could share with you. I went to see a mindfulness teacher a little while back and she sat me down and she said to me... about 20 minutes. I had to close my eyes and she said to me, "How are you feeling?" And I'd say, "Anxious." And she'd say, "Can you let it go?" And I'd say, "Yes." And then she'd say, "How are you feeling?" And that went on for 20 minutes. Right? So I just went through a range of emotions and she was there tracking and at the end of it she said, "Do you realize you said anxious and frustrated more often than anything else in that 20 minutes?" And I got really angry. "I'm so annoyed with this. I've been working on trying to get rid of this fear and frustration for years and it's still there." And she said, "Tell me a little bit about your history." I said, "You know, I grew up in Liverpool. So you know, challenges in that city and challenges... Walking on eggshells in home life sometimes and also going to school and so it's a place of quick wit and ridicule, potential violence, you know, so you learn to be cautious and anxious." And she said to me, "So okay. If you had not been cautious and anxious and felt those feelings when you were growing up, how do you think you would have coped?" And I said, "Well I wouldn't have survived that situation without the anxiety, without being worried about not standing out." And she said to me, "Then why are you so angry with it then?"

MURRAY: This is what I was saying earlier.

LEE: And I thought, "Ah, right." So it's not about being angry with these things and



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pushing them away. It's about seeing them clearly and as you said, when it arises in that moment where I might be led to defend or be passive, in that moment to feel that feeling and think, "Thanks for coming. Thanks for looking after me when I was 15."

MURRAY: That's it.

LEE: "I don't need you right now. Thanks."

MURRAY: Third and final question, Lee. What's been your biggest failure that you'd be willing to talk about? How does that inform your leadership today?

LEE: I loved this question and hated it as well. I found it quite hard to access a particular event and I started to think about failings, but actually there is one that comes to mind, that came to mind as part of, "You know what? I need to own that as a failure of mine." So I mentioned this program that completely transformed not only my career direction but my life. I was in IT at the time. I started to lead differently. That led to some tension with my bosses and so on. I got... I secured as a secondment in HR. I went back into IT as a relationship manager, a couple of sideways moves, and ultimately ended up full-time in leadership development at PWC. For the last three and a half years I was there. In my last year that I was there, I got to lead the facilitation of the program that had set me on that journey years previous. So it was a really really nice way to round off my time. However, because of the nature of that program, it was a very deep personal experience for people and we weren't very good. I wasn't very good when I came out of my own experience at talking about the business impact of that kind of learning and I remember my boss being very confused. I came out of the first conference and she said to me, "So what have you learned?" I said, "I don't know. I'm still trying to digest this." I'd been asked these tough questions, "Who are you?" and sent into this deep reflective space and I could not articulate at that time why that might be relevant to the work that I was doing. When I led the program years later, I was not aware enough of how important it is to communicate the business impact of that kind of work. So what ultimately happened was there was a bit of a changing of the guards at the top level in the learning and development team. The attention on what effective leadership development should be was going in a different direction and I didn't do a good enough job in my final year of communicating the business impact of the kind of work that we were doing on that program and as a result the program got canned after 13 years.

MURRAY: Wow.



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LEE: The program didn't continue after I left. I wasn't politically savvy enough. I wasn't influential enough. I didn't think enough about, "How can I engage people who haven't been through it to understand the knock on impact of this kind of work from a business perspective."

MURRAY: Yeah.

LEE: And the reasons for that were because of some of my failings and my failings being the passiveness I talked about earlier, a fear of talking to the big guns directly and also the combative stuff as well, the power. So fighting the cause in an emotional and less rational way. So now whenever I do any work I'm very very conscious of the participants leaving the program afraid to have some deep reflection, that they need help to... for themselves to see the link between self-awareness and the actual... how that translates to impact for business on the ground in organizations like WFP. So I'm paying a lot of attention to that now in the way that I structure my engagements and in the way that I help participants re-integrate back into their work.

MURRAY: Nice. Nice. So as we move to finishing up here, if you could give some advice or tips for people who are starting to ask the question, "What's it all about?" Because you've been through it. You started asking those questions and at some point we do ask the question, "What am I on the planet for?" Where should people start?

LEE: So I think the first step is to look backwards, to look forwards. So to reflect on people, events, times in your life. First step is just to map that out and then to kind of zoom out and look at that life history and think about, "So how has that shaped the way I view the world today and my place in it? How am I showing up? What are the natural gifts that I have that are emerging from this? What are the examples in there that I just don't want to be that kind of person or have that kind of impact and therefore what is it the impact that I'd like to have then?" So a combination of strengths and impact I think is a good way to think about purpose.

MURRAY: Yeah.

LEE: What are the goods that I've got that have been built through all of my experience, the good, the bad and the ugly. Okay? Let's have a look at that and try and surface some of the gifts from all of that.



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MURRAY: Yeah. Nice. Nice.

LEE: Right?

MURRAY: And I like that, yeah, past then the future. I think the piece about this which is for everyone is to understand it takes time. Some people sort of want to sit down and we'll do a day and work out a purpose, but for myself personally, it takes a long time. In a sense it never ends. You're always refining and adjusting. So I think the other piece about this is not to put pressure on yourself to actually to come up with an answer.

LEE: I agree completely. Yeah. Eight years it took me to arrive at the statement that I have for myself now, which is to enrich as many lives as I can in my lifetime and have fun doing it.

MURRAY: Yeah.

LEE: Okay. It's taken eight years.

MURRAY: Yeah. So Lee, if people want to reach out, they want to connect with you, how would they find you? What would be the best way?

LEE: The website, www.infinityleadership.com.au or you can email me directly lee@infinityleadership.com.au.

MURRAY: Beautiful. Thank you for your time today.

LEE: My pleasure, Murray. I enjoyed it. Cheers.

MURRAY: Great conversation. Thank you. Cheers.

Thanks to Lee. A great discussion on the importance of purpose in our work and how to connect with it and remember, if you have a leadership moment you want to share, simply follow the link in the Show Notes and tell us all about it.



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[End of Transcription]



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