



**DOMINIC WELLS**

LESSONS FROM THE MOUNTAIN

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**LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**



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**EPISODE 24**



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[Start of Transcription]

**MURRAY:** My guest today is Dominic Wells, director of Clearpoint Communications. Dominic, welcome.

**DOMINIC:** Thank you Murray.

**MURRAY:** Great to have you on the show. We've talked about it a bit and we finally got you here.

**DOMINIC:** That's right. Good to be here. Thank you.

**MURRAY:** Thanks for your time. Dom, let's get into this. Before we get into our main questions let me ask you, what's your big passion at work?

**DOMINIC:** So for me the passion comes from a sense of knowing that I, as an individual, I'm growing and I'm learning and if I'm able to do that with, for me, clients and know that they're in the same process of learning and growing either personally or through their careers then that's when I really feel like I'm in the sweet spot and in the flow. So the role that I do as a leadership coach and facilitator, that obviously enables both of those events to happen. Certainly and probably classically as you'd expect the clients that I work with are in this space of learning around leadership, around their own behaviours, but what is often surprising is as a facilitator and as a coach that we or I am learning as part of that process as well, which is really rewarding.

**MURRAY:** I think, yes, and there's a big piece about that when you work with people, you learn as much as they are maybe learning from you and it's always great working with different people.

**DOMINIC:** Absolutely.

**MURRAY:** I've worked with you a bit and you've got this... Yes, I certainly sense this whole piece around the learning and helping people evolve, but the other thing that always comes through is your connection to the outdoors and I know the story, but it would be great for listeners to understand where that comes from and how it has played out in your career.

**DOMINIC:** Yeah. Thanks Murray. Being outdoors has always been really important to me so from early childhood just memories of camping and going hiking with my parents and being in the scout movement, getting me a lot of access to being outside and adventures really. Once I left school I took advantage of that and was



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fortunate enough to work in adult education. So I lived and worked in Devon in an outdoor adventure centre and we focused on kayaking and climbing and sailing and really, as I said, in a sweet spot from that perspective. As that developed and as I matured I became qualified in some of those sports and ultimately put my focus into mountaineering. So I lived and worked around a mountaineering environment and was fortunate enough to climb really around a lot of the world. So we went... We used to go to Scotland for Scottish winter climbs which I'm sure you'll be familiar with.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**DOMINIC:** And then I climbed quite extensively in the European Alps, in arctic Norway and Sweden and over a period of time built the skillset and built the experience to go further afield to the Himalayas. So I've climbed in areas like that, which is obviously very exciting and a great time of my life. So probably a decade spent in that environment and learning a lot about myself. Incidentally, not realizing it at the time, but also learning a lot about leadership. So when you think about some of the decision making you have to undertake in a mountain environment and you think about the people that you're climbing with and the people that you're responsible for, then it's really important to have clarity around what your objectives are, to be really clear about how you all play as a team, the way that you're communicating, being connected together from a relationship perspective. So there have been many examples where, in that mountaineering environment, where you're so reliant on your team members or your climbing partner and each really have your back and they're holding your rope. You get to know their strengths. You get to know their development areas and you interact in a way that almost becomes seamless. And that's quite fascinating when you play that forward into a corporate environment into leadership from various perspectives, thinking about objectives that you need to create from a business perspective and being really clear about when to push hard, when to pull back a little bit because the risk is too high, but also thinking about the culture that you create within your teams and really thinking about how much trust do you have and how much do you have each other's backs and what a difference that can make on performance. So really the alignment and the transition between the outdoor world and mountaineering from my perspective and then thinking about leadership in a corporate world although they seem a long way apart, they're actually quite closely aligned.

**MURRAY:** So you've had this career, mountaineering outdoors. What was the point of change? What caused the transition to move from that intercorporate world and then eventually into what you're doing now, the leadership development?



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**DOMINIC:** Yeah, thank you. It's interesting. I left school at quite an early age at 16 and I had little if no qualifications. But I was very happy, happy to move into a wide world that I could explore and be part of that actual environment that I was talking about. There was an incident that happened that really became the defining moment of really changing that pathway for me. I'll give you the background on the story. So I was climbing with a good friend of mine and we were in the Himalayas and we climbed a mountain which was a remote mountain on the Nepalese-Tibetan border. We reached the summit and it was a pre-monsoon period so the weather was really good or was supposed to be good. When we got to the summit we just saw this colossal bank of cloud coming towards us from the south that was really unusual and quite dangerous. It was a significant weather event. We recognized that we needed to get off the mountain as quickly as we could. It had taken us two days to get to that summit and we had to get back to our base camp where we had a friend waiting for us and really sort ourselves out to prepare for this oncoming storm. When we got down to our base camp we set ourselves up. But the storm was phenomenal. We experienced probably a foot of snow every hour. It was dumped on to our base camp and ultimately we were in quite a dangerous situation. So there were avalanches coming down quite close to us and some were literally hitting our camp in terms of hitting the tents that we had around us. So we made a decision to move away from the camp that we were in to get to some higher ground which was safer. Ultimately we dug in and we were stuck in the storm for two and a half days or two days and three nights unable to go anywhere, unable to move. We didn't have access to food and pretty much the only water that we had was the snow that was piling up around us. So that's quite an interesting scenario to find yourself in with two friends and really when you start to face your own mortality you start to think about the decisions you've made in your life and the decisions... all the opportunities that might be ahead of you. What was interesting, as the conversations progressed from what we were going to eat when we get out of here and how many beers we were looking forward to. We really got quite serious and the question of if we get out of this situation what we want to do moving forward.

**MURRAY:** Was it quite a big 'if' at that point?

**DOMINIC:** Yes, realistically the question on our minds was, "Can we outlive this storm or was this storm going to outlive us?" And we didn't have any data points to guess whether either of those things were going to happen. So there was a certain amount of uncertainty and a little bit of trepidation, not necessarily fear, but certainly this is... We're going into the unknown and we're not quite sure how this is going to end up. Ultimately what was interesting for me, when we started to discuss and think about



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what we would do in the future it was a very cutting environment for me where I looked back and thought, “Actually you know what, although I’ve had a fantastic 10 years, what I really want to do is go back to school where I want to educate myself.” Because I recognized it as an opportunity in the future that I hadn’t really explored yet and realistically with a sense of maturity then that’s going to be the opportunity that I need to follow. So what was fascinating is as we got ourselves out of that situation, which we ultimately did, which is probably a story for another day. Once we got back home I went back to school, went to university and then found myself on a completely different career path that took me into a corporate environment.

**MURRAY:** So that’s your ‘aha’ moment then.

**DOMINIC:** Absolutely.

**MURRAY:** We got that question to ask. So that’s your ‘aha’ moment in a storm not sure if you’re getting out of it and you decide there’s more to life than outdoors.

**DOMINIC:** Yes.

**MURRAY:** Take a different path. Pretty powerful.

**DOMINIC:** Yeah, it was. What was interesting for me is how that was sitting with me. So wanting to go back to school, wanting to move forward in a different direction was with me all that time, but interestingly it took a significant event for that to come to the fore.

**MURRAY:** I’m sure a lot of people can relate to that significant event to bring something to the fore.

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 at [murraywright.com.au](http://murraywright.com.au). Now back to our guest.

So you’ve gone off on this journey now into the corporate world. Who has influenced you the most around that? Maybe it’s before or during. Who would you say has influenced you the most?



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**DOMINIC:** I'll give you some context before I answer that question. I actually struggled with that transition from being in an unstructured environment to going into a much more formal, structured, contained world which is the corporate world, the organizational environment and I turned up at an office where I didn't... I've used email before and I didn't have the skills of using Excel or any of the documentation or running a meeting. They're all new skills to me and I was consciously aware that I was in an environment that I didn't have experience in and as a consequence of that I started to doubt my value and my ability to operate in an organizational environment. As a consequence to that what I did was I became quite introverted and would hold back on engaging in meetings, providing insights, sharing what could be valuable information. I know it's termed as an impostor syndrome and that's probably an extreme term for where I found myself. But certainly I was challenged and was questioning whether this was an environment that I fitted in. But I got some really good feedback. So a colleague of mine recognized that I had more to offer and came up to me and said, "You know, you really should engage more. Speak your mind. You've got value, just share it because we want to hear it. We need to see you operating like that." I took it on board and embarked on this journey of, "I really do need to be much more assertive in the way that I operate." So I was in this process of learning and challenging myself to do that and there was one particular incident, and this is where one individual had the biggest impact on me, where I was in a client meeting... So there was a number of clients. So it was myself, my manager and a couple of colleagues. I was attempting to contribute and to add value in the meeting. Halfway through the meeting this manager stopped and he put his hands up and he looked at me and he pointed and he said, "Dom, if you've got nothing of value to contribute, it's best that you don't say anything at all."

**MURRAY:** Whoa!

**DOMINIC:** Yeah. I was stunned. I was actually quite humiliated and quite shocked and stunned and after the meeting I sort of had to really sit down myself and go, well what are you going to do with this piece of feedback essentially? And once I'd settled down I really recognized that I had the choice. I could go one of two ways. One was to retreat even further into introversion and uncertainty or really to say, "This is not who I am. I'm going to respond to that in a much more positive way." Ultimately I did. Ultimately I put that to one side and chose to continue on that path of contribution and adding value and believing in myself as a consequence of that incident and that served me really well. From that point onwards my career from a corporate perspective actually started to grow and to blossom. So I'm actually grateful. Two things, one is I'm grateful for the interaction because it really set me on a path of change and I learned a lot



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from that. Secondly, what I learned is that as leaders we have such an accountability and responsibility to be careful in terms of how we handle other people and how we engage with other people and how we support other people because we can have a huge impact without even knowing what's happened and whether that individual intended for that to happen or was it just a, it was a blindside for them, but what's interesting is 25 years on I'm still talking about it.

**MURRAY:** Still talking about it. As you were telling the story I had a big question. I wonder what his intent was? You know, you got these old guys... I know he's got it, but he needs to go a bit more so he... You know, there was a style around that and you don't know.

**DOMINIC:** You don't and actually you know what's interesting is with a positive growth mindset I would like to think that's the case and say, "Why thank you because you really helped me..."

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**DOMINIC:** ... and that then I hope and assume that was your intention."

**MURRAY:** Or he could have been just a complete asshole. [laughter] But it worked. How good is that? How good is that?

So you've done a lot. You then moved to Australia and got into your leadership development, etc. What would you say, and this is the one people always enjoy. They love this question. Your biggest mistake that you've made, whether in corporate life, in your leadership development side of things, something that hasn't quite gone right for you?

**DOMINIC:** That's a good question from one leadership consultant to another, one that we ask a lot and it's really hard to answer of course, but I think that there've been many and I and in a way I appreciate that as being many because that's really my opportunity to learn and grow. One that stands out early in my consulting career in leadership was when I was actually ironically working with a company that I had been an employee of previously. So I'm working back in the organization and we were running a program around communication and around creating a culture for feedback and it was a single day program and I actually knew some of the participants on the program. My intention was to a) create a climate for culture and b) provide or give those participants an opportunity to provide each other with





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valuable development feedback so they can recognize the value that that provides back in the organization. What I didn't do, when I look back on now, is I didn't... that wasn't realistic to try to do that in a one-day program and also I didn't invest in understanding what the back story or what the culture was at that particular time. So really what I'm doing is asking 16 individuals to provide each other with feedback at a time when it was completely inappropriate without any setup around trust or around really understanding what the value of this would be from an ongoing perspective. Ultimately I set up an exercise of feedback and pretty much watched a car crash in action. I'm thinking, "Should I stop this and if I should, how do I do it? Or do I just let it go?" It didn't end well to be honest with you. And I recognized it in the moment. I recognized it afterwards. I then received feedback from the organization and learned a big lesson. And the lesson really is just not about how do you set things up, but it's about when you are operating in a leadership environment you have other people's emotions, their feelings, their 'what's going on for them in their life' that you have an accountability and responsibility for and it's unreasonable and unfair to expect people to respond without a tough feedback or to be able to share their own personal insights in a particular environment. You just have to manage that.

**MURRAY:** Yeah. The piece that really comes through for me in that as well is this whole piece about actually understanding context, background and really investing in that because we make so many assumptions about people, behaviours, teams with "Oh they're terrible" or "They're great." There's always that story behind them. Until we understand that we can't actually do good work.

**DOMINIC:** So true. And I think what we sometimes forget in an organization is that people aren't just resources. They are human beings who have stuff going on and it's only when you invest time to find out what is going on, you can suddenly put it together and go, "Okay, I understand that. That makes sense." But unless you're asking that question or investing in the insights then you really don't know.

**MURRAY:** You talk about questions. That's a great lead. I've got this thing going at the moment with questions. What would you... People listening they want a bit of advice. What would you say are a couple of... one or great powerful question for people to ask themselves or ask of others in work that helps understand people, helps get a sense of what's going on? What advice would you give around that? Is there a question that comes to you?





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**DOMINIC:** I think there is and the question for me sits around the concept that leadership is made up of. Holistic leadership is about the being and the doing of leadership and certainly we find ourselves doing a lot of things on a day to day basis and we have KPI's and we have quotas and we have budgets that we have to hit and therefore we do a lot to achieve that. That's valuable from a outward perspective, but the risk is we do that at the cost of not focusing on or engaging with the being of leadership. We talk about the being of leadership is that emotional connection whether it's introspective around your own emotions or whether that's the emotional connection between two people or the group. I think it's really important to create that balance. So to answer your question the question would be, "How am I feeling?" if you're being introspective or "How did you feel? if you're engaging with somebody else. And I think that's really important because often how we're feeling... If we could become conscious and aware of how we're feeling there's a lot of messages and guidance in that that we sometimes overlook. So if we're clear in terms of how we're feeling or how others are feeling, we can then explore that. We can create high pulses or we can ask more questions to really understand what's driving that emotion and then we can act on that. But if we're oblivious to it or not aware of it then it's really hard and we just get caught up into doing more and more stuff. So "How do you feel?" or "How do I feel?" is really important.

**MURRAY:** Yeah, really powerful. I think the piece in that for people is... because you talk about the doing. We've got to find the time and give themselves the space to ask and answer that question and for me it's a lot about connecting with yourself and trusting what information you're getting out of that because there is a lot of information and the more aware we are the better. Really good. Good. Well that's beautiful. Thank you for sharing your leadership moments.

If people want to contact you Dom, reach out, how would listeners do that?

**DOMINIC:** A number of ways. One you can contact me directly by email [dominic@clearpointcommunications.com.au](mailto:dominic@clearpointcommunications.com.au) or there's a website [www.clearpointcommunications.com.au](http://www.clearpointcommunications.com.au).

**MURRAY:** I will put those into the Show Notes. Dominic Wells, thank you very much.



**DOMINIC:** Thank you Murray. It's been fantastic and a pleasure.

**MURRAY:** Brilliant. Thank you.

[End of Transcription]



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