



SHARON CAULDWELL
DIRECTOR SALES, NEXT HOTELS
MAKING A DIFFERENCE

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 30



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[Start of Transcription]

SHARON: (00:00) Take every opportunity. If you are asked to do something that's not necessarily in your job spec, which so often in hospitality in hotels, opportunities come up. Things change. Someone is not available. Take every opportunity. Be a 'yes' person. Be the person that they know they can go to who will help, who will try to do whatever it is that needs to be done.

[music]

MURRAY: (00:24) 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.

In today's podcast I catch up with another former colleague, Sharon Cauldwell. Sharon is Director of Sales Australia and New Zealand with Next Hotels. She has been within the same company for 25 years and has seen many changes over those years. Sharing her leadership moment, she talks about change, the importance of personal branding, building your networks outside of work and leaves us with a powerful question. Enjoy!

So, Sharon welcome.

SHARON: (01:09) Thank you.

MURRAY: (01:10) Great to have you on the show. I thought it would be interesting today to talk to you because there are a couple of elements. I think one is you've worked for many years, same company, but in a sense not the same company because over those years there has been so much change and change really has been part of your life in a big way.

SHARON: (01:34) Yeah. Yeah, it has actually. It's interesting because you... I'm getting to a point now where people are saying, "How long have you been where you are?" And next year it will be 25 years, which is in today's work environment a phenomenal amount of time to spend with one organization, but I've done a number of different roles over the years, but I guess the back half of my career has been in a more senior role within the organization. But yeah, not the same company. I mean 17 of those years I worked for what was essentially a family business and then that business was sold, and I've been working for a Singaporean based company in the back half of those years. So, it's been... Yes, and it's been constant change throughout.



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MURRAY: (02:17) Yes, because even within that company there's been change, rebranding, etc.

SHARON: (02:22) Yeah. Yeah, a number of rebrands.

MURRAY: (02:24) So, in terms of change when you look back on it, because it's interesting. Everyone is now where... We talk about being in the VUCA world and change is part of life. You are experienced in it. What have you seen of change? What have you seen done well around change?

SHARON: (02:41) I think... It's interesting because, you know, very often change comes down to how it's rolled out, who is at the helm and how the culture that they set flows down into the rest of the team and, you know, by now I've had some various experiences with that. I think one of the things for me with change is I actually quite like it and it's obvious because I went around for a lot of it. I quite like the opportunity that change brings. Obviously we've got our external clients and customers that, you know, to some extent remain fairly steady, but the importance of internal customers and internal relationships is something that I guess I've been quite focused on throughout my career and making sure that those relationships are the best they can be and that my, I guess, so-called influence works within that changing environment.

MURRAY: (03:36) Yeah, and I think as you said, it depends who is at the helm, the culture that they try and create and push through the organization. What are some of the frustrations, the things that you've seen people miss or forget but which at the time might seem actually quite obvious?

SHARON: (03:53) I think, you know, very often with change comes expectation and sometimes the expectation to fix things, to make sweeping change that perhaps isn't always in the best interest of the business, having the... I guess taking the time to stop and consider what's in place and also look at where the depth of knowledge lies, where the skillsets are and who is prepared to perhaps step up to the mark and make a change in their roles to contribute to the business in a different manner.

MURRAY: (04:31) Yeah. Thank you. And I think that I often see change in... It's easier when you're external to it. You see people not really acknowledging the past and what's been done and what it has contributed to get to that position and people can sweep away a lot of history and opportunity by not doing that.

SHARON: (04:53) Yeah. Look, I guess that is one of the things that particularly I've



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seen now that I have been around for some time. There is, you know, generally quite strong deference to coming to me and saying, "Hey, you've been here for a while. What do you think? What have you seen? What worked previously?" So, you know, I've been I guess very lucky in my experience that there has been interest in where we've been before, what's happened, how it's worked. I guess a nod and some respect for what has come before. So, I think that's something the organization I'm with has been quite good at acknowledging and recognizing.

MURRAY: (05:34) Yeah, that's so important. Now coming back to you. So, you've been 25 years in hospitality, largely in a sales function. First question, who would you say has influenced you the most in your career?

SHARON: (05:49) Yeah. Look I mean, obviously I've crossed paths with many wonderful people over the years, but I guess to reflect on these question I've gone back to the beginning and one of the first people that really made me stand up and take notice and that was a lady by the name of Janet Turner who was reasonably senior in our organization. This is when I was very early into my role with the company. I think I had just been made a state sales manager and I saw Janet... She was a bit of a physical force. She was the sort of person who could see things that were not right, systems that were not perhaps as they ought to be. One of my strongest memories is of our business planning process at the time, which was 24 years ago, and it wasn't perhaps what it needed to be, and it wasn't as... I guess our ability to deliver on results and make plans that were understood throughout the organization and acted on as we went through the year. And she actually took that process, shook it by its head, turned it around and with a team of other fabulous women at the time, shifted that process and made it really quite automated in a time when automation wasn't part of the process. You know, it was back to the letters and notes of the days and she built systems and things and made a whole process a lot smoother. I guess that's one of the things I really know that her leadership was. She was very focused on making a difference and having her tent [?] stand up and be counted and that was one of the big take always that I've actually had through my whole career is that ability to make a difference and to reflect back on, "What have I done this week and how have I made a difference to the business?"

MURRAY: (07:38) Fantastic and what a great reflection. I think that's something that... It's valuable, useful just to keep ourselves grounded and focused.

SHARON: (07:46) Yeah, and I think so often in sales there can be a bit of fessing about with some people and I think you really do need to keep yourself very transparent in what you're doing and very accountable.



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MURRAY: (08:00) And this... We talked before when you were coming on to the show, what would the theme be, and you talked about your personal branding and how this is a bit of a passion for you. And I suppose when you say that I look back and you've been there for 25 years. People come to you, ask for historical knowledge. You've maintained your position, that leadership role, that's all coming down to personal branding. What is it about personal branding that's so important?

SHARON: (08:32) I think, you know, there's a lot of elements to it. It's being in a sales role obviously, how you visually present and bring yourself to the table each day is important. I think really for me my personal branding is really just a unique combination of skills and experience that I bring, but also, I think it's about really how you differentiate yourself from the other people in your field doing your role. I really love connecting people. I've been quite focused on building my networks and my circle of influence outside my organization as well. I think it's important to engage with industry organizations in whatever your chosen field is and that you build a reputation and a profile within those organizations as well. I think being a 'go-to' person to connect people to other people is very valuable and nothing gives me more enjoyment than seeing people who I've previously worked with going to other roles, going to other situations, reconnecting with them, having that ability to take those relationships and keep growing them over the years is really I think something that's part of my personal mission and something that I bring to the table as one of my unique skills and really differentiating myself from perhaps others.

MURRAY: (10:03) You talk very clearly and passionately about that. When did you or where did you start to be conscious of this whole concept of personal branding and you talk about your mission. If someone is listening and then, "Oh yeah, I want to... That sounds great," where do they start?

SHARON: (10:22) Look, I think they need to make a real intention about where do they see themselves in their career, a) Is the field that they're in one they're happy in? Is it something they want to continue with or does it need to go in a different path? And I think that is something that you can do with your personal branding too is you can extend yourself into other areas. I've recently started working with the University of Queensland Business School in the post graduate program that they're doing providing some industry mentorship.

MURRAY: (10:54) Yeah.



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SHARON: (10:54) Now, we know the educational path is not one that's necessarily aligned with exactly what I'm doing right now, but it's something that interests me and it's an opportunity to give back to the next generation coming through, but at the same time it obviously extends my circle of influence into a different area. It extends my skills in a different way and it gives me an opportunity to shift my path in another direction potentially. Not a thing that I want to go and teach at university, but certainly I think having that ability to communicate what you do and how you can help other people is really important.

MURRAY: (11:37) Yeah. Correct. And I suppose this is a nice segue into that second Leadership Moments question. What was your 'aha' moment, the moment when you suddenly understood what leadership was all about?

SHARON: (11:51) It's a pretty tricky question, that one, and I have so reflected on it because... I guess, you know, even with so many years in the industry. We've seen a lot of different things and a lot of different people. Probably mine was with a fellow by the name of Darryl Courtney-O'Connor who was the chairman and owner of Touraust Hotels Constellation Hotels as we were, and essentially my boss for 17 years on different levels. He was very much at the top of the tree and I did in fact end up reporting directly to him. We as an organization many years ago were in a bit of a crossroads and we needed to take some really tough decisions. Essentially, they were his decisions to be taken, but he took the decision to pull his leadership team together and to lay it on the table and say, "Right. Do we go this way, or do we go that way?"

MURRAY: (12:43) Yeah.

SHARON: (12:43) And we literally threshed it out and we as a group decided to buy back the farm and to go in that direction and he got our buy-in as a result of managing that leadership decision in that manner. He then had to go on to make, you know, a number of redundancies within the organization and a number of those people were good friends and colleagues of mine and I've never seen redundancies handled in such a positive manner. Everyone who walked out of that room was delighted. I mean obviously there were sad to be going, but he'd done it in such a manner that they felt it was a new opportunity for them. They felt valued in what they'd provided to the organization and they were ready to take the next step and I've never seen that happen before or since. It was really, a really interesting process and it really made me reflect on, "Wow! That's what leadership is all about."



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MURRAY: (13:42) So what is it about then? What is that 'aha' moment? What do you take from it?

SHARON: (13:46) Look, I think it's treating people with honor, dignity, respect – having that ability to engage people in the journey ahead, but at the same time take the tough decisions that are required for the business but have everybody feel positive about those decisions when ordinarily a redundancy situation is not positive.

MURRAY: (14:11) No. No, and I think what you say there, it's that whole engagement of people in the process in shaping their own future. Fantastic.

SHARON: (14:19) Absolutely.

MURRAY: (14:19) Yeah. Brilliant.

I hope you're enjoying the show. I just wanted to take a moment to remind you that you'll find great leadership questions from our guests at murraywright.com.au/leadership-questions or follow the link in the Show Notes and while you're there why not share your favorite questions?

And now, back to our guest.

Now, you've been selling accommodation hotels for all these years. Things have changed. So how do you manage to keep yourself relevant throughout that? And I've got two questions in a sense. What have you had to let go and what have you had to find?

SHARON: (14:59) I've always been an early adopter. There's something new, some system, some way to make things more streamlined or make things better for either us internally or our external customers, I'm all on board. I don't feel like I have any legacy pieces that I need to keep taking with me. Interestingly, and it's something... This is a question that I do, and I ask a lot of external people that I meet basically in the training and development field. What's new in sales? What are people doing that they haven't done before? And it's interesting because I think even in this... You know, everyone is online and emailing and texting and WhatsApping and different cultures did things in different ways. I know that with the China market so much business is done through WhatsApp now. That's really not necessarily relevant for our side of the world at the moment, but personal relationships still hold a lot of value and while people may not know that the number of face-to-face appointments



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we're having today is a little bit different from 20 years ago, certainly still speaking with people, connecting with them in different ways. It may be more trade show and event oriented now than going to their office. It might be more about bringing them outside of their offices them going to their offices. Look, I think things have shifted, but certainly it's still about knowing people and having relationships with people.

MURRAY: (16:32) And if there had been one thing that you've had to develop in terms of skill or approach that's been really hard for you, but you've done it? I'm just interested, you know, the new thing to adopt for that past way of working.

SHARON: (16:47) Yeah. Look, I think, like I said, sales can be a very non transparent part of the business and one of my passions has always been being very transparent, so the more systems and procedures and platforms and processes I can put in place to make my team and myself able to, with the click of a button, present what's been done this week, what business has been written, what change has been made in the business is really powerful and that's something that I absolutely embrace. I think the days of... I remember when I started we used to fill in a piece of paper with numbers on how many phone calls we'd made that week and how many appointments, and we used to fax it through to head office

MURRAY: (17:33) Yes.

SHARON: (17:34) And now, we use a platform called Sales Force and I can jump in at any point and see exactly what was said in the meeting this morning with a client. So, I think that ability to be very transparent in what we're doing is one that I've embraced. I don't know if there's anything that I've been uncomfortable with, with change and you know what? Perhaps that's one of the things that, one of the reasons I've been able to weather a lot of change internally is because actually I really quite enjoy it.

MURRAY: (18:05) Yeah. Yeah. And now here... And all you're saying is you're actually embracing technology and using it as much as you can to support what you're doing.

SHARON: (18:14) That's my thing.

MURRAY: (18:15) With that focus on the personal relationship.

SHARON: (18:19) Yeah. Absolutely, and I think it's interesting. So often, particularly in the service industry like we're in, people hate... The customer complaint is very



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concerning, and you know, "How are we going to address this?" You know, some of my very longer serving and best customers have come out of things going wrong and us having an ability to, a) acknowledge it, b) fix it, and then know that there's somebody they can come to if things aren't exactly the way they need them to be.

MURRAY: (18:49) Yeah.

SHARON: (18:50) So, I think that's really important to be able to take ownership of making things right for the people.

MURRAY: (18:59) Tell me a bit more about that 'taking ownership, making things right' because it's a really important point I think.

SHARON: (19:05) Yeah. Look, I think one of the sayings that I... One of Darryl's sayings that I really clearly remember was, "Pull the trigger." And he was a great one for, "Just make it happen. It doesn't have to be 100% right. In fact, it may be 60% wrong, but just do it." So, I think, really in business that sitting on your hands not doing anything because you're not sure that it's going to be right is no way to move forward. I think you really need to pull that trigger, take a decision, move in a forward direction and if it doesn't work, work out why it hasn't worked and make it better next time.

MURRAY: (19:45) Yeah. That's great. Just do something because we can get paralysis.

SHARON: (19:49) Yes.

MURRAY: (19:50) By analysis. Isn't it? Yeah.

SHARON: (19:51) Exactly.

MURRAY: (19:52) Yeah. Great.

So, third and final question, your biggest failure. The question is, what was your biggest failure and how does that inform your leadership today?

SHARON: (20:06) And another one I struggled with, Murray, because I'm generally a pretty positive kind of person. I don't like to acknowledge that anything has gone wrong, but I think this one for me... It really came back to people. Hiring and firing.

MURRAY: (20:21) Yeah.



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SHARON: (20:21) When I was very new to leadership and I ended up in a situation where quite quickly... I had a team that I needed to build and... That was a tricky thing. I'd never hired before. I hadn't managed people before. I really did learn on my feet and I had a situation where I was... We were very keen to get somebody into a role in marketing in Sydney. The applicants we had were not 100% what we exactly wanted. However, that was what we had. So, I took a decision to hire anyway really wanting to I guess fill that gap and not leave the gap open. So, I hired somebody who I think in my heart I knew was not the right fish, but I thought will make it work. I initially saw some warning signs quite early, which I really didn't react to in the way I would now, and I persevered with this person thinking that I could, you know, change the... make it work, make it happen and that ended very badly. So, that I think was my biggest 'aha' moment is... And now I am quite happy to leave a role unfilled for as long as it takes to find the right person. I also know the right person when I see them. I mean I don't need to interview 20 people. Sometimes I might interview one person. I go, "That's the person," and I'm quite happy to move forward with that. I think sometimes... You know, in this hiring and firing game when it's not your bread and butter and what you're doing every day, you feel that you need to speak to ten candidates before you can possibly make a decision.

MURRAY: (22:00) Yeah.

SHARON: (22:01) But that's not always the way now. I think you know when you've found the right person.

MURRAY: (22:06) It's interesting, as you said, because there's this whole thing about a gut and the gut feel. Some will say it's a gut instinct and of course the research is telling us we've got brain cells in our gut and that affects our thinking and mood. But they've also researched where they... You can within the first few seconds work out whether that person is good or bad and there are studies to show it.

SHARON: (22:31) That's interesting. I think it's a culture thing. I think. I call it PLUs. I like to hire PLUs, people like us.

MURRAY: (22:38) Yeah.

SHARON: (22:38) And I think you can get a sense of that quite quickly with people. I know that... I mean a definition of a friend is somebody who wishes you well and obviously in management we're not all friends and having said that my best managers and the people who I've led the most stuff over the years have been people that I truly knew and believed wished me well.



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MURRAY: (23:04) Yeah. Yeah. That's important, isn't it, that you know people are... they have... and you talked about it earlier, an intention. An intention to do good and be fair to everyone.

SHARON: (23:15) Yeah. Absolutely and I think that as an employee particularly, it's always great to know that whoever is up the vine from you is saying, "Don't worry," he's doing a good job.

MURRAY: (23:27) Yeah. Yeah. They've got your back. That's great.

SHARON: (23:30) Absolutely.

MURRAY: (23:31) Now, we're sort of winding up a bit now. Young people starting out in the sales game or any in their career, but maybe specifically sales, what piece of advice would you give to them?

SHARON: (23:47) Look, I would say take every opportunity. If you are asked to do something that's not necessarily in your job spec, which so often... In hospitality in hotels opportunities come up. Things change. Someone is not available. Take every opportunity. Be a 'yes' person. Be the person that they know they can go to who will help, who will try to do whatever it is that needs to be done. I think very often these days people get a bit tied up in knots over job descriptions...

MURRAY: (24:17) Yeah.

SHARON: (24:17) ... and what is or isn't part of your role. Obviously, you know, because on an ongoing basis, yes, you may have to deal with that, but I think taking the opportunity to put your hand up will be helpful. Be a 'go to' person. Be the person who can help solve a problem and really consider yourself a leader right through your career. You may not have staff reporting directly to you, but that's not to say that you can't stand up, show up nicely presented, your hair brushed, lipstick on, tie straight, all the right things and have people look up to you. You can put yourself in a position of leadership just through your actions, how you present and how you interact with your internal customers as well as your external customers.

MURRAY: (25:06) That's so good. That's what this podcast is all about. It's about leadership and it's so true. We all have an impact, so we're all leaders no matter what.

SHARON: (25:15) [cross talk] Absolutely.



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MURRAY: (25:16) Oh great. The other thing is I've been asking people about their favorite question or questions around leadership. Have you got a question or questions you use with people or in different situations that can be something you ask yourself? What's the one 'go-to' question you have?

SHARON: (25:38) I think for me it's... It's been a bit of a recurring thing in this conversation, but it is around people who want to make a difference. It's around... "What have you done today that's made a difference to the business?" I think really taking accountability and wanting to do a good job.

MURRAY: (26:03) Yeah.

SHARON: (26:03) I think that that's a little bit underrated these days. I think a lot of people... Obviously there's a lot of push and pull on our time. There's a lot of that work-life balance thing that everyone likes to talk about. I don't believe that it needs to be a balance. I believe that you just really need to show up for whatever it is you're doing at that moment and stand up and be counted.

MURRAY: (26:27) Fantastic, and I love the question. So, what impact have I had today? That...

SHARON: (26:31) Yeah. What's the difference that I've made today?

MURRAY: (26:34) What's the difference I've made today? What a powerful question. That is huge.

Sharon, if someone, our listeners want to reach out, connect with you, what's the best way to do that?

SHARON: (26:46) They can find me on LinkedIn, Sharon Cauldwell.

MURRAY: (26:49) Yeah. Fantastic. Sharon Cauldwell, thank you for your time and sharing your leadership moments.

SHARON: (26:57) Thanks, Murray.

MURRAY: (26:58) Thank you, Sharon for sharing those leadership moments and your



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perspectives on change and personal branding and what a great question to leave us with. What's the difference you made today?

Talking of questions, you'll find Sharon's questions and other powerful questions from our guests at murraywright.com.au/leadership-questions or follow the link in the Show Notes and while you are there, add your favorite questions to the list.
[music]

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. Head to 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.

[End of Transcription]



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