



INGRID MESSNER

LEARNING FROM NATURE

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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[Start of Transcription]

INGRID: (00:00) The biggest challenges, what people think the challenge is and what the real challenge is, is not necessarily always the same.

MURRAY: (00:12) Welcome. My name is Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments where you will hear real people's stories about the moments that have shaped their leadership. You'll get invaluable leadership insights, knowledge and resources, and I hope, some inspiration to be a better leader, make a better world and live a better life.

(00:34) Today, I talk with Ingrid Messner about her book, Naturally Successful: How Wise Leaders Manage Their Energy, Influence Others and Create Positive Impact. Ingrid shares her inspiration from traveling and learning from indigenous elders about how to use traditional wisdom to inform our leadership in this complex world. And to be able to connect, care and commit to have the positive impact we want in the world. We have a great talk about self-awareness, our relationship with others and understanding the bigger picture and how it all fits. And of course, Ingrid shares her leadership moments. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

(01:18) Ingrid Messner, welcome to Leadership Moments.

INGRID: (01:22) Yeah. Thanks for having me, Murray.

MURRAY: (01:24) We finally make it.

INGRID: (01:26) Yes.

MURRAY: (01:28) We're going to talk today about your book, Naturally Successful. Before we jump into that, it might be good just to introduce yourself. Tell us who you are and what you do.

INGRID: (01:41) Yeah. So it's a long story, but basically, I'm a leadership expert and I work as a coach and mentor, facilitator. I've written the book and I mainly work with people, leaders in the sustainability and social change space and help them to achieve more with less stress and struggle.



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(02:02) So in the book, it's all about energy management, which I learned a lot about during the last few years. We might come back to that later. And then also how to influence different types of stakeholders and how to manage a system. And the system thing is something that I can't not do, the whole system thinking. So, what I do for my client and with my clients is quite often connecting the dots, pulling all the things together and looking at things from different perspectives and helping them bring it together and find a new way to do things. And basically, it's all around solving some leadership challenges with them and for them. And I've been doing that for ages.

(02:51) So I think I started working... Let me think. It's so long ago, like 1989. So I've been doing this similar thing for many times, my first 12 years in corporate and then since about 2000, in my own business and since 2004 in Australia. So even Australia is quite long now.

MURRAY: (03:15) Yeah. Yeah. What led you to this sustainability piece?

INGRID: (03:38) I was always interested in nature and how it works and I have traveled a lot. And up to now I've traveled to, I think, more than 50 countries. It seems a bit ridiculous, the number, given COVID and everything now, but it was my inspiration to see how different landscapes work and how people interact with it. And sustainability, for me, is a very holistic thing, it's people and planet. And with the people piece, because I've traveled a lot in Asia and India and in some other countries, I've seen also the downside of corporate activity there, but also the positive effects. So I always was interested, as I said before, like how does it all connect? So did whatever the people do there in the different supply chains and cultures, how does that connect to the environment they are in? So how is it influencing them. For example in India, when you're in the north, it's very different than compared to the south. So it looks different, people look different, what they do, what they eat – everything is different. And that has an influence on how they operate in all areas of life. And when I started my career in corporate in 1989 or so, with Unilever, it was the first time when... Literally more or less, my first job was to reduce packaging material and reduce the...

MURRAY: (04:59) Even back then.

INGRID: (05:00) Yeah, So that was in Germany. The whole perspective on that started then, in '89, when I was sitting there in marketing and reducing some materials and having these constant conversations with people in production and what that would mean in the shop. Germany had this system of the Green Dot, that companies had to

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pay or still have to pay for recycling. So I introduced that and so over the years, that became a big focus. And so I ran many innovation projects on how you could do all these things differently. And then in parallel, I learned a lot from how other countries do it in Europe mainly where most of my job was.

(05:49) And then when I came to Australia in 2000, for the first time for holiday. And we did a tour with an Aboriginal ranger in Kakadu National Park and he explained to us what one tree is. What's the meaning? How is it connected? What does it mean for the community? How can you use it in all its different ways? And that was the first time that I realized there's so much knowledge within the indigenous communities about how to live sustainably that I really wanted to learn more, which I then did over the next decades now. So I learned a lot from indigenous people how to look differently at all these systems. And so, I think that's one of the most influencing forces, actually.

MURRAY: (06:44) That answers the first question – what or who has influenced you the most? Yeah. So, that experience of the indigenous way of looking at the world.

INGRID: (06:58) Yes. It was one of the moments where I thought, "That's just the start. So you have to go deeper and discover more and speak with more people and look at it from different angles and hear different stories." And then, "How do I make it useful for the business community?" Because by then it was already clear (or became clearer) that climate change is showing up in more areas, especially in Australia, and more companies like the insurance industry, were seeing the risks given by that. So how can you connect these areas then when there's a risk and a problem? But on the other hand, we have lots of solutions already in other countries and other communities and other cultures. So how can you bring these things together as a leader to be at the forefront?

MURRAY: (07:55) So when you're doing the work in organizations with leaders, what are the sort of challenges they're facing? And how do you help them work through that?

INGRID: (08:10) The thing is, what people think the challenge is and what the real challenge is, is not necessarily always the same. But how it shows up and what people would be open to express is that they are quite stressed, they are overwhelmed by all the tasks, quite often, by the complexity and uncertainty, especially at the moment, and then, because they have such a big network they have to work with, many, many

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types of stakeholders they have to approach and they're not only in one country or one culture. So they have to now via video conference or phone before, and you have to communicate with all these different people. And quite often I hear clients say, "Oh, this is really difficult," or "That person is difficult." And then I work with them to realize it's actually not necessarily the other person that wants to be difficult, but it's more the mindset, how they label things that the other person is saying or doing and maybe they haven't really thought about how they have showed up.

(09:28) So I basically, first of all, make them aware of what's happening in them and in other people and maybe even around them and then accept that to a certain degree and align it with all the other things they have to do. And then find some action steps that actually are more like an experiment or like a little pilot they can try and see whether it works or not. And then adapt it so then in a way it starts again.

(10:03) So the first thing I most often have to do with people is to raise their level of awareness. What's happening for them? What's happening in another person? Up to the very simple thing – sometimes I feel a bit weird saying it – but up to the point that sometimes I have to remind people to breathe.

MURRAY: (10:24) Yeah. Absolutely.

INGRID: (10:27) Because when I see someone who is highly stressed and they're not breathing properly, then their brain can't work. So then obviously, when you then have a conversation with a difficult person, you might not be at your best. So then that is meant to go pear-shaped.

MURRAY: (10:47) And that, even in a sense, is the systemic piece because how is your own system operating? Is it at its optimum?

INGRID: (10:54) Yes. And I'm always fascinated because we are so relying or want to rely on technology solutions, artificial intelligence and all of that. But if we can't even handle ourselves...

MURRAY: (11:10) Yeah.



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INGRID: (11:11) How do we want to handle all the other pieces in an effective and good way? So I think it has to happen in parallel. We can't just say our technology will solve everything for us. Just because I'm tracking with a smartwatch everything that's happening in my body and what I do, it doesn't mean that it works.

MURRAY: (11:32) Yeah. Exactly.

INGRID: (11:33) So yeah. I'm helping people to make sense of all the different data points that they have and then say, "Okay. Can we select one or two and then actually do them and build some habits around them that serve you, and ultimately, your team or the community or the stakeholders around you, and ultimately, the whole organization?"

MURRAY: (11:57) So let's come to the book, Naturally Successful: How Wise Leaders Manage Their Energy, Influence Others and Create Positive Impact. What led you to write the book?

INGRID: (12:16) I had already made one attempt to write a book. That's one of my admissions of failure. I thought, I learned so much from all the different indigenous people and I want to share with the business community. So in 2009 or 2010, I started to write a book and then noticed that it became more of a research project. I finished the manuscript, but then found I hadn't really written it with one specific person in mind. So it was very general concepts and the concepts as such are good. I've used them in workshops, but I couldn't bring it to a point where it was written for one person.

(13:01) And then over the next few years, I did a lot of coaching and had more learning and experiences in the indigenous world and with climate change initiatives. So then I thought, I have to go back to this and bring all the things together, but this time, focus it really on what are the key issues and problem areas of the leaders in the space and approach it from the other end and say, "Okay. These are the types of problems you are having." Too much stress, using your energy, difficult stakeholders, not fully understanding the systems around you so that you can't find the best lever for change. So these problems and then, how can I use everything that I learned in the interaction with indigenous people or nature or some spiritual work, meditation and all this and mindful activities? How can I bring this then into the solving the problem space?



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(14:10) And over the time I had more clients who got more stressed out or had more difficult stakeholders and then I thought, okay, this is my motivation to write it for these few clients. So when I was writing it, I was writing it to just a couple of people really, but they are representing very much many, many different leaders and organizations. So I started in the beginning of 2020 and then more or less spent the first half year writing everything, getting a manuscript and then realizing how much more there is to be done with the editing and design and publishing and all of that. So that was my 2020 project and in parallel, I had these conversations with people that I coached. And so that was like validating along the way. Is this useful or not?

MURRAY: (15:13) And I think just to be clear, people listening here might be, "Oh, it's a book about how to save the planet or stop climate change." But it's not that actually. It's a book for anyone who is leading and it... I loved it because, in a sense, we know all of this, but you've just brought it together in such a wonderful, clear, simple framework that just allows people to understand it and see the connections all in one place. So I congratulate you for that. It's fantastic.

INGRID: (15:53) Thank you. The one thing that really surprised me and lots of people that are actually not directly business leaders said, the first... So there are three parts. One part is on yourself. Lots of self-care, energy management, accountability. The second part is on stakeholders and the third part is on systems. And these people that I met in all walks of life, they said the first part with the self is valid for more or less every person.

MURRAY: (16:30) Absolutely!

INGRID: (16:31) Because you have to do self-care to a certain degree and many people still think it's selfish when I take some time off. But I see it as a community service because the better you show up for other people, the better the work would be. And they said, "I only read the first part, but that has been really useful." And I said, "Great!" Because the book is created in a way that you don't have to read every chapter, every page. So originally I thought, "If I could write something like Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, that would be my dream." So obviously, I haven't gotten to the same bestseller status yet.

MURRAY: (17:15) It's a different world, isn't it?



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INGRID: (17:18) But he inspired me in really doing that.

MURRAY: (17:21) Yeah. And the way you've written it, it certainly... And I think you wrote about it yourself. You had his framework as a model, but you wanted to contemporize it and also bring a more female voice into it, didn't you?

INGRID: (17:38) Yes. And also, I wanted to create a space where some indigenous voices show up and some other types of stories. And the stories are, in some cases, quite personal. So experiences that I had or what happened to me and what I learned from it. So in a way, it's similar, but very different.

MURRAY: (18:04) Yeah.

INGRID: (18:05) And that's fine. Because his books invite other people than my book would and yes, a very different language. And I wanted to make it very easy to read and very brief. So it's not that long of a read, I think. I'm not sure how long. On Kindle it says something maybe like four hours or so – depends on how fast you read. It's not that long. But that doesn't mean that it's not deep, because some of the things actually go quite deep.

MURRAY: (18:41) Yeah. And what was your experience that informed you in terms of writing the book in that connection piece to nature and the systems?

INGRID: (18:56) So one experience that definitely inspired it – 2017 I broke my left knee, which for many people might think as just break a bone and the tears. But what many people don't realize I broke my tibia plateau, which means that's the part of the lower leg where all the weight from the whole body with every step and when you run, goes. So there's pressure that is sometimes 7 to 10 times your whole body weight on that one bone part. And so the rehab for that takes quite long. And it's a bit more complicated than a normal broken bone. So the rehab for it took about 11 months.

(20:45) And so during that time, one morning, very early actually, I thought it can't be just that you're getting out of hospital after surgery and the surgeon said, "Oh, go and see this physio." And then that's it. And it's true, that's not all. You need a lot more to heal. And I was frustrated with the whole healthcare system that no one was there that I could ask, "Okay. What do I eat? How should I move? What sleep? And what are



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the social impacts it has to mental health?" All this is something we don't realize. And I was lucky that I found a Facebook group (one of the few positive effects of Facebook). It was a very, very supportive Facebook group with people who have the same type of break and really only that type of body part break because it's a bit unique. What I realized is, there is no one who helps you to navigate it. The group was good, but it wasn't the only thing.

(20:56) And then one morning, after three or four months into the journey, I woke up and had this idea. I have to write all the things down that I have learned by then that are useful. And then when I wrote it down and looked at it, I thought this is the same as in business. The same, virtually the same. If you want to run a successful business, perform well, you have to be well. So what do you need to be well?

(21:28) And then all these elements were literally in parallel. So one was my healing journey and one was a leadership journey. And it had the same things. And I was literally able to match the two and then I thought, "Hmm. If I could show something like that to other people." Maybe someone has a benefit from it, in the sense of... It becomes more like a checklist where if they're in a difficult spot, they can think through, "Okay. Have I done this? Have I done this? Or maybe this is possible." So it helps them just to give an idea of where to go maybe deeper because they see all the different elements. That's a really important thing that I learned as well and just to be patient during that time.

MURRAY: (22:22) Hi. Murray here. I hope you're enjoying Leadership Moments. If you haven't already a quick reminder to go to www.murraywright.com.au and subscribe. That way, you'll never miss an episode. When you subscribe, you'll receive The Power of Questions white paper and I'll send you the fortnightly Coaching Moment with practical tips and tools to support your own leadership reflection and learning. Now back to the show.

(22:49) So being in your leadership journey, we've talked about the influence of hearing and experiencing that indigenous man telling you about a tree and what the tree means and how it's used. Is there any other 'aha' moment for yourself on this journey around the whole, what is leadership, what it means?

INGRID: (23:18) I was working with a team that had a very toxic team culture. And they wanted to have a workshop on accountability and learning things. So I said, "Okay.



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Good. So the first thing before we start anything, to discuss whatever task, there needs to be some relationship building and some key hearing of things and some clarifications and trust, respect, more respect for each other." So what I made them do, which sounds simple but had an amazing impact, which is sit around in a circle, with chairs but no technology, no table between them and we had a center point with a talking stick where they could... Whoever wanted to speak could just pick it up and he or she was the only person speaking. And we answered a few questions. They were very simple and not very invasive in a way. Like, where were you born? How many siblings did you have? And one exciting or memorable childhood experience that you had? Lencioni in his, was it, Five Dysfunctions of a Team or so, does something similar with the questions.

(24:56) But the point is, there was relationship building before tasks. So it's people before task. In the indigenous world usually you would first of all get to know someone, get to know their family, community environment and then once you know all of that then now you talk business or whatever they name it. So in this workshop which was really only one day, just by spending... I think we did two hours having conversations around the circle. They suddenly discovered a shared theme that everyone had and everyone shared. So suddenly a theme popped up and then they discovered commonality. And the conversation suddenly shifted and you could literally feel how the whole room energy shifted. And then that allowed us to have more detailed conversation around other things that weren't working.

MURRAY: (26:05) I think that's wonderful reminder – people before task – and you've got to build the relationship. Because in today's environment, people, teams, we get caught up in the doing the doing, the doing and we're pushing, pushing and we don't take the time to understand the people and what's going on for them and what might be happening. And again, it's that awareness of self, awareness of others and it's also, I think, building that, as you talked about earlier, understanding the bigger picture and what else is going on in the world, the system around the different things. So yeah, it's so important.

(26:43) What would be some advice you would give to someone who is looking to manage themselves, to have the energy, influence and impact that they want in the world? What would you suggest?



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INGRID: (26:57) I think the first level of all of this is to increase your awareness and the awareness of self, the awareness of other people and the awareness of what's happening around you. And awareness quite often or most of the time happens through your five senses. And the five senses are created in a way that they need a little bit of time of picking up data and making sense of them. So obviously the sense making happens somewhere else in your brain. But the sensory awareness of what's happening in you, because people are so rushed, you slowly lose contact with your body. So if you don't do anything else, find moments in your schedule where you intentionally slow down, by slowing down, that can be just a few breaths or just a conscious drinking of a cup of tea or coffee.

(28:10) And then notice more, "Okay. What's happening in my body? Am I tense? Or am I actually quite relaxed?" And then seeing, once you mastered that for yourself a bit better, you will also notice when other people enter the room, to be more aware, "How is that person coming in?" "Are their shoulders a little bit down? Or are they really energized and outgoing?" It's a little bit often a science and art thing. It needs practice, but that you have to be aware to actually notice that this is the starting point of everything and we underestimate it. So one of the biggest things, I would say, find times where you slow down. Ultimately, it will help you to speed up, go faster.

MURRAY: (29:04) Go faster. Slow down to go fast. Yeah.

INGRID: (29:08) It is. And it's not new. We all have heard it. It's simple, but it's not easy.

MURRAY: (29:15) No. I think it's such a common situation. I was actually working with someone yesterday and you have to really force them to say, "Hey! Get out of your head. Get out of the head and just reconnect with yourself and your body and understand what's going on there." Because I think we're trained to have to think everything through and we lose the connection with a fantastic system that's been designed to inform us and guide us and if we can reconnect with that then a lot can happen.

INGRID: (29:52) And when you think of it, if you would look at your body and brain like a car, you would go and service it.



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MURRAY: (30:04) Yes. That's right. Yeah.

INGRID: (30:05) You would fill in the right petrol and not diesel.

MURRAY: (30:09) Yeah.

INGRID: (30:10) And you would refill the windscreen wiper thing, the water. So you do all these things. So your body isn't that different to it.

(30:21) And the other thing that I would like to offer people if you're interested, because we wish... You said, "What can people do?" In the book in one chapter, there's a thing called an energy map. It's like a very quick snapshot that people can fill in. And I'm very happy to send people just that energy map, because I've got it as a downloadable resource on my website anyway. It doesn't cost anything.

MURRAY: (30:50) I'll put a link to that in the Show Notes, Ingrid. That would be fantastic.

INGRID: (30:54) Yeah. So they can just download it. And then it gives you a quick overview of all the areas like your own, with other people and the system around you. And you can really adapt it to your own needs. And it only takes literally, once you have done it once, it takes you like 5 to 10 minutes to do it. But it's a good visual reminder, "Okay. There are a few areas where I'm really low on energy." So maybe over the next few weeks or whatever your planning horizon is, then you could just focus a little bit more on that.

MURRAY: (31:36) Yeah. But I think the other thing about awareness and creating awareness by doing your energy map or just connecting with yourself and what's going on in a moment, I always say (I believe it for myself), when you become aware of something, you don't have to consciously decide what you're going to do. Change will happen anyway. Because suddenly you are aware of it you will do something differently. And it's the key. And I think that's the other piece, just start plugging, coaching. It's not only for when you have a problem. It's also to make sure you sustain yourself and keep yourself at a certain level and go to the next level. So it's not only when there's problems.



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INGRID: (32:24) No. There is no end to growth and I was always curious. There are a few areas in my life I'm really curious, why do I do these things this way? And then with coaching, I realized, "Ah! These are actually some limiting beliefs that I inherited from my mother."

MURRAY: (32:50) This is another longer conversation.

INGRID: (32:54) Yes. So and there's good realizations around these things because we also can notice, things don't have to be true, they just have to be useful for people to move further. So if you have a stakeholder who is difficult, you can react to that. You just have to do things that are useful for the relationship. You don't have to focus on all the underlying whatever reasons and you don't have to solve everything. You just have to make it work at a certain level.

MURRAY: (33:32) Yes. And there is a systemic piece of, "So I'm experiencing this person as difficult. But what is the message that they're... Who are they speaking for in this moment and what's the learning in that?"

INGRID: (33:48) Yeah. Where does the behavior come from?

MURRAY: (33:52) Yeah.

INGRID: (33:53) Because when you think like that, you don't think that you have to put a label on the person. It's more, "Okay. It's one behavior that they might have been doing for ages because they might have had whatever life experience." That's where the whole belief thing comes in. And then you look at it a lot kinder and sometimes more saying, "Okay. There is a limitation. I'm not the right person to solve this for them or with them. So I just accept that this is there and I work with the part that wants to work with me."

MURRAY: (34:31) Yeah.

INGRID: (34:32) And the difficult part might be still there, but it's not meant to be difficult for me.

MURRAY: (34:40) It's not personal. It's not personal.



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INGRID: (34:42) It's not personal. It shifts your mindset. So then suddenly, you can work with people who are really not your cup of tea.

MURRAY: (34:52) Exactly.

INGRID: (34:53) You think, "Oh, they are as they are. They're not mean because of me or they're not really bullying me. It's like they can't get out of their skin and do it differently or to limit." So what I'm saying is very general. I don't condone any of the bullying or things.

MURRAY: (35:14) No. No. Of course not.

INGRID: (35:15) But to certain degree, sometimes when you think, "Oh, this person is difficult." It's a question mark. What is this label really doing for you? How do you then show up?

MURRAY: (35:29) There's also, yeah, how do you show up? And we're going into different areas here, but there's also, what do you perhaps own of that person being difficult for you? In terms of how you show up.

INGRID: (35:45) And I just wrote in my newsletter, something around the law of polarity where it's always the black and white or positive and negative. So there might be actually a gift in it. So if someone shows up in a negative way, you could also say, "Okay. What's the positive of the negative?" There is something that's sometimes a bit difficult to see. But most of the time, there's something I could say, "Ah, okay. If this is happening, I might have an opportunity here."

MURRAY: (36:24) Yeah.

INGRID: (36:25) And that gives you as a leader a much larger choice of action – where to put your energy for change, for example. You're not blocked by any wall or so. You could say, "Okay. I know there is a wall, but I could actually dance around it." Because there is actually an opening somewhere in the wall.

MURRAY: (36:46) Yeah. Exactly. And as you're talking, it's that word curiosity comes up. Be curious about it. Don't make the judgement, be curious and understand.



INGRID: (37:01) And maybe one last story with the labels and the wall that I learned from one indigenous elder where he made us walk up a mountain for two or three hours and said, whatever you look at, don't label it, but notice it for what it is.

MURRAY: (37:23) Yeah.

INGRID: (37:24) Like, for example, one specific tree. Even if you know what the tree is, don't think of the name, the label. But notice what it is in this moment in time for you and what resonates in you with this tree or plant or rock or whatever it is or even the other people going with me. And then not labeling was a really useful activity. And same as with difficult people because either they might be difficult as a label or a challenge or something. A failure in business is a label. But if you would remove labels, then you see things more for what they are for you in this moment in time. It doesn't mean that that's the truth. It doesn't have to be the truth. It only has to be useful for that moment.

MURRAY: (38:28) Lovely. A lovely story to finish on, Ingrid.

INGRID: (38:34) Yeah. Interesting conversation. Yeah.

MURRAY: (38:36) Yeah.

INGRID: (38:37) Thank you for finding the space to have the conversation.

MURRAY: (38:41) And if people want to connect with you, how would they do that?

INGRID: (38:45) I think the easiest would be if you put my email or website in your Show Notes or somewhere where you publish the podcast and then people could download the energy map. And then by that connect with me.

MURRAY: (39:03) We'll do that. Ingrid Messner, thank you for your time and sharing your leadership moments and that great book of yours. Thank you.

INGRID: (39:12) Thanks so much, Murray.

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& Associates

MURRAY: (39:14) Thanks again to Ingrid. I hope you enjoyed that chat. As Ingrid says herself, it's nothing new. However, she's condensed and captured a whole load of wisdom that makes it accessible and easy to follow. And as you think about, "What next?" Take Ingrid's advice and remember to breathe. Breathe and take the time to reconnect with your body. Get out of your head and see what you notice. Good luck with it.

(39:47) Thank you for listening. Check out the Show Notes for the key learnings, resources and transcripts from this episode. You'll find all the previous episodes leadership questions and other resources on the podcast page at www.murraywright.com.au. Remember to hit the subscribe button while you're there and receive the fortnightly Coaching Moment newsletter. One last thing. If you enjoy Leadership Moments, it would be great if you could leave a rating on whatever platform you're using. That will help others find it and of course, share it with your friends and colleagues. Thank you and until the next time

[End of Transcription]



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