



## **MHAIRI HOLWAY**

ALWAYS EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED AND NEVER  
MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

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**LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**



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# EPISODE 4



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[Start of Transcription]

**MURRAY:** 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.

**MHAIRI:** My name is Mhairi Holway and I'm the vice president of HR for Pandora Jewellery.

**MURRAY:** So today we're talking about leadership moments and I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions and thank you for your time. So first one is about people or a person in your past who whether it be upbringing at home or whether it be at work, but the person who really influenced and shaped your thoughts around leadership.

**MHAIRI:** I think one person stands out in my early career. I was in my early 20's. I was a graduate with a few years experience and then changed from a government organization to a private sector organization. It was very highly unionized, very blue collar, very traditional and there were quite a lot of disputes. One day we had a summons to attend a tribunal over a case and I knew that there was no foundation to the accusations against the company. So I went to my boss about it and he said, "Look, just pay them off. We won't win. It's unfair. Yes. Have we done anything wrong? No. But just let it go." Anyway, I wouldn't let it go and I said that we should go and challenge this and he said, "Well I'm not paying for a lawyer because we just won't win. It's just the way it is." He said... anyway I pushed him and he said, "If you want to go then by all means go for it, but we won't be paying for lawyers to defend this and so it's up to you." Anyway I went along and it was quite a scary experience. Never been in any kind of court of law before and there the unions, you know, the whole legal team were there and the shop stewards and presented the case and it went on for a long time and there was just little me there on my own. Anyway I walked away and I won the case. So it was a bit of David and Goliath, but the lesson I learned from a leadership perspective was that my boss just gave me that choice to do it and just empowered me to go and give it a go. Yeah, I could see when I returned to the office, he was watching from his office up high, from the carpark and he saw me come in and he asked me how it went and I could see the pride on his face when I told him. It was just a huge lesson to me to really trust, give trust to somebody and empower them and not be afraid of what the outcome might be. So that would be my lesson.



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**MURRAY:** I get a sense in there, he was also being a bit... he was setting you a challenge. He was just testing you to see if you would go for it.

**MHAIRI:** Yeah. Absolutely. He really did. Yeah, he definitely wasn't afraid of a challenge. He was quite a ruthless person in some ways, but he really looked for that spark in individuals that were up for that challenge and yeah, I really learned a lot from that.

**MURRAY:** So how do you use that in your role now and how do you apply that in terms of this trusting and giving people a challenge.

**MHAIRI:** I think when you're leading a team and they come up with an idea and you might think that, "I don't think that's going to work." But it's giving them scope to give them the freedom to fail and sometimes it... you know, a lot of the time it doesn't fail, but it's just giving that freedom. So sometimes you just got to let people learn for themselves. I think that would be the best learning from there.

**MURRAY:** What about a leadership moment from your... now you yourself as a leader and working through... what was the moment that you suddenly had that, "Aha! Now I get it. Now I know what it's all about."

**MHAIRI:** Okay. I think a while ago, quite a few years ago, I had a really awful experience where one of my team committed suicide and I didn't see it coming at all. We used to get on really really well and had a fantastic working relationship. But it was very much about work. We didn't talk about things out of work, things in our families or what was going on personally. It was very work focused. After the event, it was quite traumatic for everybody in the organization, but for me as his leader, I just felt that had I checked in with him more on that personal level without, you know, probing, but just having that kind of relationship. I'm not saying I could have prevented what happened, but I certainly learned from that. From that time I've always made sure that every time I catch up with members of my team, I always check in with them on a personal level just to make sure that they know that they can talk to me about other things not just things that are work focused.



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**MURRAY:** Thank you for sharing that. It is so important, but in our hurry, we're trying to get things done, we forget it. But that's what it's all about.

Now the other one. This is... the next question is about failure. So we've all had them. We all have our stuff ups, something at the time is very painful. But it's the one that you can look back on and look at it and say, "Well, but that really helped me be a better leader."

**MHAIRI:** Yeah.

**MURRAY:** That you would be willing to share.

**MHAIRI:** Definitely. There's one very memorable incident and again in my early career when I hadn't had so many years of leadership experience under my belt. I had to basically facilitate a mass redundancy program in my organization. It was a company that had very long serving employees. Basically we were outsourcing production to China and a whole department of people had to go, but there were some redeployment opportunities. Anyway I decided, given this was the first time I'd handled a project of this size, I thought I'd make life easy on myself and the order of selection was somebody that I thought would be very happy with this new... he was about to retire and the package was very generous. He did the dirtiest job in the factory cleaning a very oily machine every day. So anyway, I called him into the meeting and I think I started it off with the line of, "Have I got some great news for you." Anyway, he listened to what I had to say. I showed him the information about the package and as I looked up, there were tears rolling down his face and he basically pleaded with me not to make his role redundant and he didn't care about the money. He worked for the company for 49 years. He wanted to make it to 50 and he was just beside himself. Then I was crying as well and that was my biggest lesson never to... certainly it's good to be prepared and anticipate people's reactions, but to always expect the unexpected and never assume how somebody else feels in any situation. So that was a learning. You know, the next person that walked in was smiling and, "We're very happy with the news." So very diverse reactions, but I learned a lot from that.



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**MURRAY:** I think that's a really good point as well. We often assume that we know people, we know how they're going to react and we go ahead basing stuff on those assumptions and we get it very wrong, whereas if we simply ask a question, "What do you think about this? How do you feel?" We're much better informed.

Wow! Powerful stories. Thank you.

**MHAIRI:** You're welcome.

**MURRAY:** That was great.

Thanks for listening. Some wonderfully stories from Mhairi that really forces us to reflect on what is important and a great reminder of the dangers of making assumptions.

For more information, resources and past episodes, just head to [murraywright.com](http://murraywright.com). Until the next time.

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