

## **TROY CUTHBERTSON**

LESSONS FROM OPENING A HOTEL:  
COMMUNICATION AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

**LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**



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# EPISODE 6



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**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.

So I'm with Troy Cuthbertson, GM of the QT Melbourne and we're talking about his leadership moments. The first question I've got for you, Troy, is our own people and a person who influenced your thoughts and approach to leadership.

**TROY:** Okay. A number of people. From early days, obviously parents, father and mother. Things like respect and caring for people and always putting yourself out to help other people, but a lot of years in my younger years of playing sports with different coaches that I had. I'm thinking of football obviously, in that same environment and obviously every player had different skill levels and different capabilities and it was about obviously getting the best out of not only the individual, but getting the best out of everyone as a team. And then when you... when I sort of came into work I found there was a lot similarities in particular good coaches, but also with the not so good coaches, which is how I likened it to work as well. I mean I say to my managers through and through, you always... in your work history, you'll come across a manager that you don't particularly agree with or like, but I say to them, you can learn just as much from them as a good manager. So it's probably sports and my father was probably the two areas or people that shaped my, I suppose, management personality.

**MURRAY:** If you take your father, what is it that you take from him?

**TROY:** Things like respect and caring for people and always putting yourself out to help other people and that just... that sort of... just by servicing because that's sort of what you do. You put your customers in front of... before yourself and make sure of their best interest and their safety and you care for them staying in the hotel is looked after. So yeah, he was very important.

**MURRAY:** Okay. So in comment to your career, you obviously... the main influence is your father or your experience with sports. You get in and you're using and working away, but at some point, there would be moments where you start to learn things. What would you say was your big aha moment that you certainly got it, you understood that, "Ah now I get it. That's what leadership is about."



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**TROY:** I studied Bachelor of Business in Catering and Hotel Management and it was very beneficial, but you go from a textbook to on-the-job training and it doesn't matter how many books or pages you read about leadership and management and all that sort of stuff. There's nothing like on-the-job learning. At the university, it would certainly be of help, but it was the years following that when I became more senior in my role. So it was really it's just that on-the-job training and learning and experience and listening, watching other managers, how they handle things. How they handled guest situations. How they handled staff and it's time and experiences in the role that you learn and you grow in that. So, you know, it's probably in the early days, you know, I was probably more influenced by what I learned at university and what not and it was as years gone by, it was the things, the sorts of things... and I think in the early days where you're sort of learning management, it was when you started to step up into middle management and into the senior management roles that you sort of base it on things you were learning from on-the-job and strong leaders that you worked under. I've been fortunate enough to have been in the company for 24 years now, so there was a number of those people, all those managers that I was fortunate enough to work with that are still with the company in various roles, mostly in head office roles now, but yeah, just learning from those guys about, you know, they say the more senior you become that it's about making sure you're getting the best out of your team. That's all you do is make sure you're managing and making sure your team is productive and happy and they feel as though they're on some sort of career path and are learning over time because the younger staff nowadays they always feel as though there's something better for them, but if they're engaged in the workplace and feel appreciated as part of a learning program, then you tend to find the good people today and you can build them into very good managers. I don't know if there's any real moment. I think it's that going from the university obviously, learning. It was all... yeah that's what I was going to share. It would certainly be of help, but it was the years following that when I became more senior in my role. So it was really it's just that on-the-job training and learning and experience and listening, watching other managers, how they handle things. How they handled guest situations. How they handled staff. You know, you're just absorbing that all the time. Consciously or subconsciously you're learning all the time.



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**MURRAY:** So a lot of listening and learning from others for you.

**TROY:** Absolutely.

**MURRAY:** With your theory in the background.

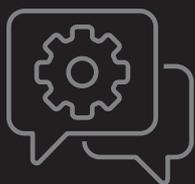
**TROY:** Absolutely. That certainly was really going to teach me and help me in those early days to understand, I suppose, because hospitality is not learning one area. It's not accounting or... You're learning all those things, but at the end of the day it really is about that service you give to people. So it's about managing people to get the best result.

**MURRAY:** And I think that's sort of the case. At the end of the day we can think all we want, but it's about managing people and getting that result.

**TROY:** Absolutely, yeah. It's the result.

**MURRAY:** So I'm still... you get the sense here I'm focusing on moments and experiences. Now with all the failures in our lives and our careers, but those failures inform us. They shape us. They help us learn. What's one failure you've had that really, if you look back on it now, it was... you can see that you've taken a lot of learning from it and it really helped grow you and strengthen you as a leader in what you do today.

**TROY:** There's a chunk of it. I mean I've got no... it's been everything. Anything significant? Certainly... and I think, you know, it's probably one of the reasons why I'm still with the Rydges or in hospitality and entertainment is that they encourage you to make decisions and there's obviously a hierarchy, but certainly from a decision making point of view it's not. So they encourage you to make decisions and obviously calculate the decisions depending on potential outcomes of both the positives and negatives of the decision. Yeah, I mean I don't see... I suppose it's the question you asked me because you do make mistakes and you learn from them. How you handle situations. How you handle a staff situation. Again it's not like you come to work every day and every situation is the same so you do it... You know, that same situation can be different in 10 to 15 particular ways because you're dealing with two completely



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different people or a different guest or whatever, so... But yeah, you just learn from those situations and in our industry a lot of what you learn is not textbook learning. It is on-the-job and learning from good role models, I suppose. So yeah, you just... the decision you make today you sort of reflect on that and go, "I got the right outcome, but was that the best outcome for the customer and in turn for the hotel? Could have I done it better? Could have I done it differently?" Possibly you'll find agreement, but again if you walk out onto the floor the following day into the same internal situation with a staff member again, you could handle it completely differently.

**MURRAY:** Yeah. I suppose what I'm looking at is one moment where you have had that reflection, "Could I do..." that you then learned and you take an approach where you do do things differently.

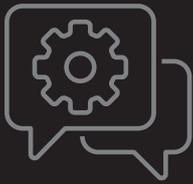
**TROY:** I think in the early days it was more about situations that required a firm response and probably it was a bit not as firm a response as required. But it's in the early days and again you learn from that because, you know, some things need to be jumped on because there are things that need a stern and a swift response to send a very clear message what I mean to that staff and to the chain, I suppose, in terms of what's acceptable and what's not in what we do. So yeah, that was probably one thing that I learned along the way and the other thing you learn from that is that every staff member responds differently to, I suppose, discipline. Some need a sort of a supportive and coaching sort of approach to get the outcome. Some need a whack, obviously, you know what I mean, and some staff members respond to that.

**MURRAY:** That's right, yeah.

**TROY:** You know, they respond to that. They don't respond to the softly, softly "Let's work through this." They just need to be told. So yeah, that's probably... again, it goes back to it's hard to learn that stuff in a textbook.

**MURRAY:** Yeah, absolutely. What do you... What traits do you look for in a leader? So do you think about your boss' leadership around you, maybe even leadership outside of work? What traits are important to you in a leader?

**TROY:** And again I think that changes as you become more senior, as your responsibility changes... as a manager or your manager's responsibilities change and you become more senior, but certainly my approach in the game, I suppose, what molded me is obviously the managers and role models I've had in my time and again being prepared to be hands on. I mean our industry is about people and our customers and I say to my managers that there are no customers back of house, so spend as much time as you can, understanding that there are administrative



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responsibilities, but spend as much time as you can at the front where our customers are and that you can't manage what you can't see sort of thing and that's from a customer point of view, but also from the chain point of view. You can be there to correct things as you need to and help and support the chain. For obviously reasons they'd be role models by being there and assisting I think. You acknowledge the good performance and obviously act on sub performance... honesty and respect, all those key words.

**MURRAY:** All the key words, yeah. But I get some of it certainly is around the leading by example and a real acknowledgement of people who are doing well and if they're not doing well, dealing with it.

**TROY:** And why they're not doing well. It may not necessarily be the staff. It might be the result of the... they haven't had... they haven't been inducted into a hotel from day one. They might have been just thrust into the business at a certain stage and haven't had the correct training. Had they been provided the training they might be making scenarios that... has anyone been correcting them while they're working with them. So I think there's a difference.

**MURRAY:** The last one. I put this in the context to the hotel has been open for six months?

**TROY:** Eight months.

**MURRAY:** Eight months now. From start to finish, how long did the opening take?

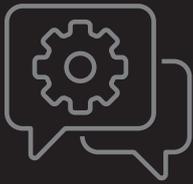
**TROY:** I suppose my involvement was more from an operational point of view rather than a structural point of view.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**TROY:** But you know, coming on board from an operational point of view obviously, you need to work quite closely with the construction and project management team because all of the operational and the training and building up towards an opening and obviously starting to take bookings and all that now...

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**TROY:** You need to be close to the project and the construction teams to be able to reconcile... Planning is crucial and I'm fortunate that I have opened a number of hotels. So it wasn't my first one, but the staging of what needs to happen and the



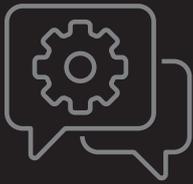
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sequence and obviously getting a few key people on board and going about in hotels, they are typically brought, at least a couple key people into key roles that I've worked with before so that they're familiar with, I suppose, how I operate and vice versa for them. Yeah, and then obviously planning, delegation, communication is crucial. What I'm hearing from construction and project managing... making sure that it's filtering down to the areas that need to know about things like that and just meeting on a regular basis to make sure that we're still on par because one area can fall behind very quickly and that can impact not only that area, but it can impact other areas of the business. So a lot of chasing and following up and now you're dealing with a lot of suppliers and external parties and again they can let you down. So don't just assume things are going to happen as planned or organized. It's about chasing. You know, you can get to day one of opening and so we don't have uniforms because x, y and z didn't... It's about again sourcing the right suppliers and again having been fortunate in having been in an opening before. You know, you've worked with some suppliers that you've got history with, so that's certainly helpful. Training is crucial. You're bringing a team of I think here 250 staff together with various levels of experience in the roles that they're training for. So training them is crucial. I suppose, if you have the benefit of an opening at the hotel, typically they take a while to ramp up. Not so much here. We ramped up fairly quickly. So we made it to... The training was crucial to make sure the guys were ready from pretty much day one. But again that's where we had the experience, key staff members, you know, very feasible and very...

**MURRAY:** So you talked about the training of the staff. I'm interested in how you took the team and as you grew the team, brought them to the destination. So you took them on the journey and even at the destination you really just set off on that journey once it's opened using all those great clichés. How did you, I suppose, work out what the purpose was, if you like, the greater goal, to motivate them and engage them? How did you approach that?

**TROY:** I think again, I think we're fortunate that we had a fairly exciting hotel opening. We weren't just another hotel opening in Melbourne. There was a bit of excitement and buzz that is associated with the QT brand. We had a fairly exciting and different recruitment. We had a couple... two days of recruitment where we put staff through a number of activities that sort of, you know, gained credit... a buzz which actually attracted a fair bit media attention, which then in turn created more excitement about the brand and the opening. So it was very much about who and what does our staffing require and again... and that's taking into account all the different areas of the hotel because housekeeping is quite different to the guys... our director of case, which are at the front. I mean those guys have got no hotel experience. They come from a theatrical background. But that's what the role requires, obviously the front office... You know, previous hotel openings that have opened have probably gone too heavy



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on the theatrical in the service side of it. Great feedback from the guests, but it was driving the back end house administrative team crazy in terms of having to correct their errors. I mean that's just not their thing. The task element of their job and that sort of administrative... doesn't excite them at all. But yeah, being creative and bubbling with the personality, that's just them. So it's about just getting that right mix and then, you know, just parading that excitement around the brand and making sure that the senior managers are very present within... leading up to it. And then training, that very thorough training. So you know, obviously this is the task side of training. You know, how to check children, how to check people in, how to take an order and all that sort of stuff and you know, taking into account that all the staff members coming and joining the team have not potentially used Octo or Micros or whatever and maybe point of sale sales system before, but maybe not this one. So everyone is at different levels in that area. But again I'm just scanning that very quickly and putting more time into the staff that needed that. And then obviously service. You know, what the service requires. What are our expectations? Making sure that that benchmark was set very high and very clear. I think that's the case. We're always making sure that your expectations are set very clear, making sure that you're accountable for something, that you're well aware that you're accountable for something and what that is and then just providing that support. You know, we had a lot support obviously from head office being the company. So a lot of those guys have been through openings as well, so... Then we've got the IT support and then you've got the project management support... music, you know, the whole thing, you have some support. So a lot of support from a lot of key people and yeah, it's just making sure you're ticking things off as you get close and working back from opening out, you know, putting lead time on when things need to happen by. There's obviously a sequence for everything. So yeah and just sticking to the plan, obviously tweaks along the way. You come across things that...whether that's from a construction with a hold up or things like training. We're supposed to do the training in the hotel before we open. Well and of course things like opening hotels, the construction always runs a little bit behind, so conference rooms weren't allowable so they may have to go and find conference rooms outside the hotel to do training sets. There's always going to be obstacles, but you definitely need to have solid plans going into it and just know that you're going to have to bend and flex and it's not always ideal, but it's just what's required to get to the end zone.

**MURRAY:** But you talk through that and think about it. Is there anything in what you had to go through in all those challenges? It's always a process even though you've opened hotels before. Is there anything new you learned about yourself?

**TROY:** Is there anything new I learned about myself? Well obviously you deal with... again and particularly with this hotel a lot more... a collaboration of people in terms



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of architects and designers and art curators that were involved. So they're working for the company. They're sort of contracting to the company, so very specific in terms of the dressing of these hotels. It's virtually just working with those guys, probably working with a lot more external parties. Typically you'll just be working with the construction happening, whereas in this case you're having to be working with stylists and designers from guest rooms to public spaces to music directors to...

**MURRAY:** So how did that change how you had to focus?

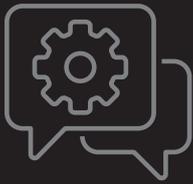
**TROY:** Yeah again, just understanding what their requirements were of us and having to... and then, I suppose, understanding what the hotel chain's requirements were in terms of what they needed to do and by when leading up to the hotel opening and just again all of, I suppose, the conduit between them all, just making sure that there was communication between what we were doing and what the external people were doing and making sure that they're aware of our timeline and them not just going off working. Again they had to appreciate... as much as we had to appreciate what they were doing, they had to appreciate what we were doing and obviously it gets to the point in the end when it all sort of comes together. So just making sure that it all came together as it should and again I was the person in the middle, I suppose, being that key link to all those external people.

**MURRAY:** I love that seeing yourself as a conduit and the key link as opposed to having to... You know, sometimes we get this impression that leaders have to be out there forging their way ahead. Actually a lot of the time it's just coordinating and linking...

**TROY:** Absolutely.

**MURRAY:** Linking people together and providing a steady link.

**TROY:** And again you're bringing people from... you're dealing with people that are not hospitality people. They're designers. So they're wired a whole different way and it's just understanding what's important to them and then going off thinking in our case that these guys had been involved with a QT opening before. So no doubt they'd learned from past experiences as well. So again, just understanding what was important to them and make sure that they knew what was important to us and just working together. There are obviously moments, but that's always the way and we got there in the end and we had a very successful opening at the hotel.



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**MURRAY:** That's good. Well that looks great.

**TROY:** Yeah.

**MURRAY:** Thank you for your time and for sharing.

Thank you for listening. Some great thoughts from Troy on how to get the best out of your team and useful insight on the importance of communication and managing expectations of all stakeholders when managing such a big project as opening a hotel.

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

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