



GILLIAN COUTTS

ONE EXTRA SECOND - SUCCESS AT HOME AND AT WORK WITH "MINDFULNESS".

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 9



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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.

Today my guest is Gillian Coutts, Country Director of the Potential Project Australia.

Gillian, welcome.

GILLIAN: Thank you, Murray. It's great to be here.

MURRAY: Really great to have you on this show. Now you and I have worked together on a leadership development program, which has really given me insight to some of the work you're doing. I think it would be really interesting for our listeners if you talk a bit about the Potential Project and the work you do there and your role.

GILLIAN: Yeah, fantastic. So, the Potential Project is actually a global consulting firm that really focuses on people centered interventions based on mindfulness. So we do leadership development and kind of a cultural change program around three kinds of core platforms, if you like. The first is mental effectiveness and performance. The second is creativity and innovation and the third is well-being and resilience in a change management kind of frame. So those... under those three kind of banners, I guess, we put together you go short and also quite long, maybe within three months interventions to help people become more calm, clear, focused, productive and effective in your decision making. In Australia, I head up the business here and we have 25 trainers who are involved in that work around the country and yeah, we've been going in Australia for about five years.

MURRAY: Great. It's an interesting space you're working in because it's really the research, the application. It's growing and growing and people's interest is growing all the time. I see you've even written a book, which I didn't realize. It's "One Second Ahead – Enhance your Performance with Mindfulness." You co-authored this.

GILLIAN: That's right. "One Second Ahead" is a pretty interesting name for a book about being present, I think.



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MURRAY: Yes, and this is the concept I'd love you to talk about because I'm assuming that's the central thesis. What is this "One Second Ahead"?

GILLIAN: It's about... So "One Second Ahead" is a title that came from one of our clients. We had done a leadership program with him based on mindfulness over a period of a number of months and within that, we had asked him to do ten minutes of mind training a day, building up his capacity for focus and awareness as well as doing some weekly coaching kind of conversations in that amount of time. After three months we went back in to evaluate the program and get some feedback from him about how he'd found... what was the return on investment for him. He made this comment which was, "Well, I got one second." The team that was getting the feedback were like, "Goodness, that doesn't sound very good." He said, "No, no. You don't understand. What I got was one second of space. The time whenever anything happens in me or around me and that moment that I need to respond. So that classic, you know, the pause between stimulus and response that Viktor Frankl talks about, he really named that as something that he had achieved by developing his mindfulness practice. So that's effectively what the book is about in terms of what are the key habits, the practices to develop, how do you do that? Not just in yourself. You know, mind training tends to create the internal conditions for being focused and aware, but how do you create the external conditions around you as well like perhaps in the way that you manage your emails or the way you run your meetings or the way you fit your clothes and your parties. The way you even set yourself up for sleep. Those sorts of things. It really explains the application of this practice to everyday life and every day work life and performance.

MURRAY: Okay. That's so interesting. I love this concept of the one second and the space because that's the thing. When we're working with clients, coaching people, everyone talks about the need to have this space to think and then also how to apply it in this environment because there's so much going on outside us that makes it hard. I'll come back to that later. What I would like to talk a bit more about you now and I see you've worked in leadership roles in a range of industries including retail, government, transport, on oil and gas, human services and it really leads to my first question. Throughout your career and if you think back on that, who is the person that's influenced you the most along the way?

GILLIAN: That's a great question, you know. Clearly a number of people could come up for me. The one that kind of stands out the most actually is a guy I'm working with at the moment, Rasmus Hougaard, who is the head of the Potential Project



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globally and from a leadership perspective, he's been extraordinarily influential on me and if I tell you a story about my experience with him, it will kind of exemplify how he's influenced me. He was in Sydney a few years ago on a speaking tour and I was rumbling around with him trying to get him from one place to another and having set up a schedule, I hadn't really left enough time between appointments for us to get from one place to another with ease. And so we're running up George Street and we had another colleague with us and it would be fair to say at that moment I was feeling pretty stressed and kind of beating myself up that I hadn't left enough time and I snapped at my colleague and said something that I thought came close to stupid and unhelpful at that time. Oh, I'll never forget it. Rasmus stopped in the middle of George Street and he turned to me and he said, "Gill, how are you showing up right now?" And I said, "Well, we're late and we're showing up late. That's what we're doing." He turns to me, "And how is your reaction to that working out for you right now?" I'm like, "I don't know but we're late. Can we just keep walking?" And he said, "How is it going to be if we show up right now in the state you're in? You think getting us there any quicker you need to be in this state?" And I kind of walked away from... or ran away from that experience really reflecting on all of the years you know, in my previous executive role, head of operations at Sheridan Sheets and Towels and Bond undies. And, you know, if a container didn't make it on to the dock and then, you know, there was an order or shipment of undies that wasn't going to make it in time for Kmart... if I didn't get really stressed about that and act like it was a really big deal and I was really upset, people didn't think I was on top of it and what I noticed is that I'd come from environments where drama and getting upset about things you actually couldn't do anything about was just part of what you did and it showed that you cared and if you didn't actually come to... I got told once before that that I'd been... you know, people wondered whether I really understood the importance of what was going on if I didn't sort of show up upset about what... you know, if something hadn't quite worked out the way it should. And yet what Rasmus taught me is all of that is entirely unnecessary effort and that anything that doesn't actually... anything that takes you away from clear thinking and the capacity to connect and engage in what actually needs to be done next is just wasted energy. So that's fundamentally changed how I now respond when things aren't going the way I think that they should.

MURRAY: Yeah that's such a powerful story and the wasted energy and focusing on what's important... it's a great lesson for all of us because I think we all get caught up in our emotional responses and again it comes back to finding the one second to think about it and really what is important and what's going to give me the best outcome. But also I think the other part of that is your impact on the people around you and that we sometimes forget.



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GILLIAN: So it's really... He's taught me that I actually have a choice. Whereas before I felt like it was almost like an automatic reaction that just happened, whereas now I realize actually it's a choice.

MURRAY: It's the old classic, "But that's just the way I am." The reality is we have a choice.

GILLIAN: That's exactly right.

MURRAY: Yeah. Fantastic. So you talked a bit about the roles you've had, etc. What is it that brought you to mindfulness?

GILLIAN: Yes. Good question. I had a period... what are we now? It's about seven years ago now where I was in that role as head of operations and I had gone off on maternity leave to have my son and as I came back to work, he was about ten months old, I was diagnosed with breast cancer literally that week. So I had this kind of double slap to the head experience of one, becoming a mum, which was kind of mind rocking enough and then the second was having this cancer diagnosis and treatment. And when I came back to work following the chemo, I was trying to juggle, you know, a senior role, a new baby or really a toddler at that time and still really exhausted from the chemo. Someone said to me, "You should try mindfulness." And it would be pretty fair to say that I swore at them at the time. They could just bugger off. But I was pretty desperate and so I started doing ten minutes a day. It was focus training and breath and after a couple of weeks I started feeling more calm, which was interesting and good, beneficial and then a couple more weeks later, my husband said to me, "Do you realize you're easier to live with." "But that is so funny because so are you." So it was just like a mutual kind of spirit arising there. I was feeling more in control but apparently I was being less controlling, which is interesting. And then a couple more months later... I sit on a couple of boards and one of the board members leaned over to me after a meeting and said, "I don't know what's going on with you, but it's like you're suddenly smarter." That is so not a compliment, but what he was actually calling out is that I'm starting to show up differently and so that was kind of a... I did it out of response from just desperation and need to be able to feel some sense of centeredness amongst all this juggling that I was doing. And yet, it really made a huge difference to me.

MURRAY: That is so good to hear and you're well over your breast cancer now and operating, which is great. I find when I'm coaching, people who I'm working with and



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I'll say, "Oh, you should try mindfulness." And it's a bit like you. You get the reaction of the rolled eyes or those that do it they say, "Well nothing is changing," and I'm at pains to say, "It's a very subtle change. It takes time, but you've got to stay with it and it comes." And it's so encouraging to hear the testimony, I suppose, from other people to you about those changes that were happening.

GILLIAN: That's right and I think also people expect that the practice itself is just going to make you more calm instantly because often, when someone first tries it does. Hoping they'll be more calm, but then, you know, two weeks down the track actually what you're building is the capacity to notice and be able to be aware. And of course you start to become aware of just how busy your mind is. So it's actually not as comfortable or relaxing anymore. Actually sometimes people will say to me, "Oh come on it's been four weeks," and, "When does the practice get easy again?" And "You know, I'm not getting any benefit in the practice." And then you say, "Well, hang on. How is the rest of your life going? And they'll say, "Oh well, actually I'm much calmer at home. I'm having much better time with my kids and, you know, I had a meeting the other day and I didn't overreact. But when is the practice going to get..." Like there's the expectation that it's all about... the practice actually, you do the practice and it is what it is, but the benefits actually arrive in the rest of your life.

MURRAY: That is so helpful for me too. I'll share that with people. For those people who try and, you know, we will recommend them to an app or whatever. You get your ten free sessions. For those people who try and let it fall, is there one tip you can give them to help them sustain it and keep going?

GILLIAN: Yeah. That's such a good thing. I'll give you two. One is that you can always get back on the horse. So the reality is you go stop doing it and you can always get back on again and you will get better at starting again. But the other thing for me is I don't think... I cannot set myself up to say, "I'm going to meditate every day for the rest of my life," because that is just too overwhelming for me to even contemplate committing to something like that. But what I have committed to do is to do some practice in the next 24 hours even if it's just one minute. So it's a sense of, if I just take care of the next 24 hours then the next 24 hours can take care of itself, if that make sense? So it's never like... I won't be letting myself down on the big picture. It's just going to be on the micro, on the day-to-day, "Can I just do something."

MURRAY: Yeah, and I think that that's the other great point you make there. You don't have to sit down for 20 minutes and do this. It can be literally one minute of just focusing on something while walking or just taking the time to catch a breath. It doesn't have to be big stuff. Great tip. Great tip.



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So I want to move on now as we go along to the second question around leadership, which is, through your career, what was the aha moment, the moment when you suddenly got it and understood what it was all about.

GILLIAN: That's such a provocative question isn't it, because it's, you know, what is it all about. I think when I... what comes up to me when you ask that question is it's about why it isn't seen and when did I start to see things differently. I had a particularly painful experience. I was part of a team. It was called a better business team. So, you know, process improvement and extract costs from a business so that we could increase the profitability and I had this really painful experience where all of my life until that point I had been a process improver. So I led implementations that were introducing new computer system to improve processes. So I always had a very logical, linear kind of approach that if you're going to do this... if you want this sort of impact, you have to put in all sorts of imports and that's how it's going to work out, if that makes sense. So I was then asked in this project to save ten million dollars and I had been able to identify a number of savings that came to about five million. And so I went back... and so I had kind of agonized over this with the team for about three months and I went back to the executive team and just said, "Look I'm sorry. I've been able to find five. I don't think ten is there. I don't think we can sustainably run the business if we take ten million out. We have to take only five because of a certain subset of the business and I turn around... and I'll never forget it... the executive that I reported to turned around to me and said, "Speak to the hand Gill, the answer is ten." I was really... and it was really interesting because what I did next was basically I worked myself into a mental breakdown because I was trying to mathematically solve how could we possibly take ten million dollars from this business and most of it was labour and people people so that was going to have significant impact on people's lives. How could we reasonably take ten million dollars from this business and still function? And I couldn't work it out and I literally drove myself nuts, into a sleepless kind of three week frenzy. And at the end of it, I went back to the executive and I said, "Look I'm really sorry, but I'm out. I cannot find it." He got a piece of paper and he sat down and then he said, "Gill, it's bloody obvious to me. You saved five million. Fantastic. So that's in year one. Year two, we're going to suggest that we do a certain initiative that the board will probably say no to. That's worth about two and a half million and in year three we're going to do another initiative, you know, the board again probably won't approve it because it will be too risky. So that's 2.5... so there you've got, you got your ten million. Easy done." And I was just gob smacked, but what it taught me was that there are many different ways to do things and I, until that point, had only really seen things from a process, linear, relatively straightforward perspective and that opened my eyes to the political, to the sort of way the game is played, if you like, in the bigger picture. That guy was really clever. It wasn't that he



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was trying to manipulate the board or anything like that, but he was trying to help me solve the problem that I'd been given, which was ten million, no ifs or buts. It was just working with what was whereas I was trying to solve it in a very different way. So it really kind of like I started to see the political system in a very different way to what I'd done before that.

MURRAY: So how did your approach change after that? And I'm really interested in your approach in terms of dealing with people like that and managing those processes.

GILLIAN: The one? Still a lot more questions? Sorry. One, realizing that the way I did things wasn't necessarily the only way. It fundamentally made me ask a lot more questions and at least a lot more of the framing others had around problems, not just my own framing. It also helped me realize that most people... within the bounds of business they're not going to... there are requests that come that are impossible, absolutely, but actually hold the space for not knowing without driving yourself nuts. So the capacity to not know the answer, which had made me so sleepless before, I now sit with much more easily like, "Well, there will be an answer to this. We just need to keep thinking about it from different perspectives."

MURRAY: Great. Great learning. I think that asking the questions is the thing... I used to be terrible and I probably still can improve, but the more questions you ask and get it from different people, you get so much more clarity and I think...

GILLIAN: Taking perspectives.

MURRAY: Yeah. And the other thing you're talking about there and I see it with the leaders all around. We've got this concept now that when you see people with a concept, as leaders they've got to be the one to provide the answer. They've got to fix everything when it's really finding out where the answer is and letting it come to you and use the resources, mainly the people around you to get it.

GILLIAN: That's it and it's that whole complicated... this is complex kind of seeing... isn't it that complicated things have technical detailed answers whereas complex requires a whole, you know, there may not be one right answer. There may be many better answers. How do you, as they say, how do you keep seeking a perspective to find that out, find that answer?

MURRAY: And I think... again using and trusting the people around you and getting them to... because they probably got the answer. You just got to ask them the right way and they'll tell you.



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GILLIAN: Totally.

MURRAY: Yeah.

GILLIAN: Totally. That's true.

MURRAY: So moving on to the third and final question, Gill, and this is the... for me it's the one that... it's the funnest question. For the person being interviewed it's not always fun, but what is the failure, your biggest failure that you can look back on and see that through that failure it really informs your leadership today.

GILLIAN: Well, it's funny because the situation we just talked about, with the five and ten million dollars, to me would be one of my biggest professional failures. Another one which is slightly personal but has leadership implications was actually... when I was going through my chemotherapy treatment, I had started out that situation... I was diagnosed and within 24 hours I developed a project plan and about when I was going to have my chemotherapy treatments. I was going to have it on a Thursday and that would mean that I'd minimize my time off from work and I'd be sick on weekends rather than during the week and I was still getting about with a family and a young baby and pretty quickly I was in the first treatment. I was hospitalized because I just had a much more violent reaction to the chemotherapy than most. So I'd go on from seeing myself with someone... there was a 5% chance that you would get through. I would normally have a sense, an arrogance, still a sense that I would be part of the 5% that would get through and I realized actually I was part of the 5% that are going to totally totally fall apart from this treatment. And I did. The treatment was three months long and I think I got to two months and my oncologist looked me in the eye and said, "We're going to have to stop the treatment." I burst into tears and said, "What's wrong? You can't stop because that will mean I failed. I will have failed to be able to make it through the treatment and that's not acceptable to me." And when I look back on that, I see that it's the most mucked up, head space I can possibly imagine, but that was a classic example of how I would play... that unless I was able to successfully get through everything, then I was a complete failure. It's a really black and white thinking and also complete personalization of external factors. What was really precious about that experience, although incredibly painful, was I got to see just what a mucked up head space I was in. My treatment took me a good six months, but as I came out the other side... that experience kind of set me off into almost like a diagnosis of post traumatic kind of stress condition and as I cannot bear the sight of that, I just realized the way that I thought about things had to change and I mean I kind of... when you asked about the mindfulness piece, that really was a significant part of that change. Just being able to observe my own thoughts and start to realize,



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you know, thoughts are real but they're not necessarily true.

MURRAY: Yeah.

GILLIAN: And the wisdom to know the difference.

MURRAY: There's also something in there that harps back to something you said earlier in our discussion around control and actually the sense of needing to control everything.

GILLIAN: Yeah. Totally. Totally. And at the end it's about sanity right, and your own self confidence. Who am I if I'm not perfect or who am I if not this high achiever actually? You know, a human preferably. But it's completely enough, really.

MURRAY: Yeah and a nice reminder there that we have to give ourselves permission to be human at times.

GILLIAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MURRAY: We often forget it. That's difficult.

GILLIAN: In terms of how that impacted my leadership now. Obviously that's the most self leadership learning in that, which I think has been really critical, but I think also for me now I'm much more sensitive to listening for how people are talking to themselves and just helping bring a little bit more awareness to that so that people never have to hide what they're thinking or feeling, if that make sense?

MURRAY: Yeah.

GILLIAN: That they can bring all of it and we can work with all of it, if that makes sense.

MURRAY: Yeah.

GILLIAN: And it's just... so bringing the whole human to work is really important to me and to just be aware... to kind of be on the lookout for anyone who... in myself as well... any patterns of getting stuck or over personalizing or any of those sorts of things that are just an absolute road to nowhere.

MURRAY: So in that I hear a great care for people not only about what work they're doing, but about themselves and how they're turning up.



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GILLIAN: Yeah, absolutely.

MURRAY: Great. Well thank you for sharing that. That's great. We'll wrap up now, but in wrapping up a couple of questions in terms of anyone who is looking to... "Okay, I'm convinced now. I want to have a go at mindfulness." How would you recommend they go about it? What would be a good first start for them, first step?

GILLIAN: For those who are really interested in doing the practice, then apps like Headspace, which use... I don't know, it's had tens of millions of dollars invested in it now, but it's extraordinary meditation app, it's worth having a look at and it's got kind of programs built into it and things. For people who learn better in groups than just googling mindfulness programs. The public courses particularly open ground in Australia. It's a brilliant provider of really good quality mindfulness programs. If you're interested in the workspace, then grab a copy of "One Second Ahead" the book and looking at how to apply that to work. How to apply it to the way you're managing. How to apply that and develop your own practice is a good way to go about it as well.

MURRAY: Great. Thanks and for the listeners, we will actually... we will put a note about those recommended resources from the website so you can follow up on that.

So Gillian, thank you for your time and your great stories. Much appreciated. Some of our listeners might want to get in touch with you. What would be the best way for them to do that?

GILLIAN: Fantastic. If they go on... either look me up on LinkedIn, Gillian Coutts or on the Potential Project website, potentialproject.com. You'll find me under the team resources and my email address is there as well.

MURRAY: That is absolutely wonderful. Thank you. Great to get those insights about mindfulness and I think for me it's really how simple practice can actually change your life in really significant ways and change the impact you're having on the people around you, both at work and at home.

GILLIAN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: Beautiful, Gillian. Thank you.

GILLIAN: Right, Murray and thank you for your work.



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MURRAY: And I look forward to working with you again soon, I hope. Thanks Gillian. Take care.

GILLIAN: Thank you.

MURRAY: A big thanks to Gillian and thank you for listening.

Gillian has given us a lot to think about. If you've not tried mindfulness I hope it has motivated you to explore and discover the benefits. If you practice mindfulness, I hope it encourages you to stay with it, and as Gillian said, it doesn't have to be a daily thing, just remember it's there and use it when you can. You'll find the notes and links to the various resources talked about today in the show notes on my website at murraywright.com. Whilst you are there why don't you subscribe to the Leadership Moments podcast, that way you'll never miss one. That's it for this episode. Until the next time.

[End of Transcription]



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