



**ROB METCALFE**

THE THREE QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

**LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**



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**EPISODE 12**



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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 I'm talking with Rob Metcalfe, sole director of Succeedo Global. Succeedo supports executive leadership teams to proactively secure and shape the future for their constituents.

Rob, welcome.

**ROB:** Thank you, Murray. Nice to be here.

**MURRAY:** As always, I'll be asking the three Leadership Moments questions as a frame for personal stories of leadership and getting the insights they give us. So Rob, you've had a varied career... officer in the Royal Marines, you started your consulting career with Oxford Consulting and headed up LIW, growing it to a global leadership consultancy. It would be really interesting to hear a potted version of that history and understanding more about what you do now.

**ROB:** Okay Murray. So if we go back in time, we need to go back to the immaturity of adolescence, which I'll cover briefly. I had really no idea what I wished to do with my life when I was at university and immediately post university, which caused me to say, "I need to grow up." So I did join the Royal Marines at that point, which for those people who are familiar you'll know is a reasonably challenging environment to operate in and I think that founded many of my views on leadership. I spent 14 years there, served all over the world and in various operational theatres as well as just really interesting places like the Arctic and really formed a view that organizational leadership was the way for me to shape my own future. So from there, I got myself into a position which is fundamental to who I am today, a hospital bed position which is not a great place to decide on what you really want to do with your life. So my advice to everybody is, don't wait until you're in the hospital bed before you decide what you want to do and why. So at that point I repurposed 14 years into my military career to start to say, "I'll shape the future in a slightly different way by trying to work with the most senior leaders I can find and influence the world to be a better place." So that led me to join a consulting group in the UK called The Oxford Group for three years before coming to Australia. The plan was always to come to Australia. Came here, set up as a one-man band in 1995 and then LIW, Leading Initiatives Worldwide, evolved through the process of various partnerships. And I managed that for 14 years. So I seem to go in 14 year cycles.



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**MURRAY:** Fourteen year cycles.

**ROB:** And now having handed over to my successor in LIW, I'm enjoying my rather more independent life as the sole director of Succedo Global, working with executive teams because they're the biggest leaders that I think I can pull to shape the future.

**MURRAY:** You talk about the importance of having a clear "why" and being really clear about that. Where does that come from for you and how has yours evolved over the years?

**ROB:** Well that's an interesting question. So I'm not sure I would have articulated it as the importance of "why", but even as a kid, I was constantly questioning "why" particularly around institutional environments.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**ROB:** And be it churches or schools or universities, I was very puzzled by some of those institutions about what their "why" was. So I've always kind of looked up for the reason for being, the reason why we're all here and I think that's made me a natural candidate to start talking about purpose as my thinking became more mature. The military also influenced me very heavily. So one thing the marines particularly was good at was saying, "Why are we doing this?" if you understand the reason why, you can always find your own way how, but if you don't understand why, the how you come up with may be irrelevant to what the overall intention is. So I'm very much formed, at a day to day level, upon military thinking, but more of a personal development level around the bigger picture "whys". I was going to use the word spiritual but I probably don't use the word spiritual as much nowadays as I used to do.

**MURRAY:** And it's an interesting concept. You talk about the military being really clear about the "why" and people will follow you. It's amazing how many organizations actually fail to articulate that point.

**ROB:** Yeah. And that's been my experience and so that's the source of some of the thinking in the work that I am privileged to do today.

**MURRAY:** Yeah. It keeps you in business.

**ROB:** Well, it keeps you interested as well.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.



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**ROB:** So I think keeping you in business is an interesting way of articulating a “why” really badly.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

So let's get to that first question. Who has influenced you the most?

**ROB:** So if I go to the leaders in my business experience first and there was a lady called Sheena Porter, and I will name her, who said on day one of my work at The Oxford Group, “My job is to liberate you of me as quickly as I can and then liberating you of me, the way I will do that is to ask you three questions and the three questions are where are you going and why, where are you now and what are you going to do next?” And then she did ask me those questions every time I saw her. So it beheld me well to think through the answers because she asked them and in thinking through the answers ahead of seeing her, she profoundly influenced, actually the whole evolution of LIW and my current thinking, which is a around those three questions. So the international level, ‘where are we going and why’, at the organizational level, ‘where are we going and why’, at the team level, where are we going and why, at the personal level, where are we going and why. So not by accident LIW has become LIW3, W3 being those three questions symbolically represented in the brand. So I think they are the most powerful questions that a leader can ask. We work with them every single day. More recently I think that is confirmed by the neuroscience, which is why I took the word spirituality out a little bit earlier. I think what I used to believe was spiritual is now being scientifically proven. So it's kind of both.

**MURRAY:** So where do you see that science, in the neuroscience? What led you to that?

**ROB:** Well I think the MRI scan, which I've been fortunate enough to experience personally...

**MURRAY:** Not out of choice?

**ROB:** Yeah. Not out of choice necessarily, but it's been very lifesaving for me. I think as we observe where the blood flows in the brain... if you ask yourself a future orientated question before a present orientated question then you're activating the prefrontal cortex and we can prove that.



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**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**ROB:** So we're actually helping people to use the brain by asking those three simple questions. They couldn't be simpler or more profound.

**MURRAY:** Yeah. LIW calls that the leadership mindset.

**ROB:** Yes.

**MURRAY:** And I think they're a lovely set of questions because they're strategic, but also so tactical just on a daily basis.

**ROB:** And sensible.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**ROB:** Most of what we're talking about comes down to common sense, but if we can turn common sense into habit, which again the neuroscience is helping us to prove, then the practices really routinely enable better thinking.

**MURRAY:** Yeah. We'll put up those three questions on our show notes so people can refer to those.

**ROB:** Excellent.

**MURRAY:** So you talk about... sorry, was it Sheena?

**ROB:** Sheena Porter. Yes.

**MURRAY:** Sheena Porter was the person that influenced you most.

As you went through your career, what would you say was your aha moment when you suddenly understood what this leadership thing was all about.

**ROB:** That's a tricky one because there's been a few and you ask a question where I could focus on the negatives, but I won't. I'll focus on a real positive. So there was a time of my life when I was working operationally and from a military perspective and there was a particular incident where I had a massive aha moment. The incident was when I was supposed to be preventing a bomb going off in a particular place and



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we had some data to say there was a bomb going to go off in a particular area. The bomb actually went off somewhere else, which was unfortunate. There was loss of life and so on, but my job at that point was to control the movement of several small groups of people around a particular area and not necessarily control the movement, but control the synthesizing of their observations. As this incident happened, I felt myself going to that zone of unconscious competence or subconscious competence, which is an interesting place to be when you backfill. So let me just describe what was happening first. So I was able to see the world through the eyes of the extended team of people I was working with and they would have operated into their 50s so I guess in terms of total numbers, I was seeing the world through individual sets of eyes. But completely subconsciously I had no idea what was happening. Now when I think about how that was able to occur, there was a whole lot of preparation that I'd had prior to being deployed into this particular theatre of operations. There was a whole lot of experience I already had doing what I was doing. So I probably had never been technically better set up for success because of the system than I was for that particular incident and I thought, well if we can get people through creating the conditions for success to get to that point when they are in the zone or in the flow, whatever athletes would call it. I experienced that and that's a great place to be. I was almost energy free. I wasn't expending any energy and I was in a... not a transcendental space. I'd never been more conscious of what was going on ever, but the competency that got me to that was put in there by the leaders that surrounded me and the system that surrounded me. And so if we can aspire to people having that kind of opportunity where they can be in the flow in a real sweet spot, then that's a good place to be.

**MURRAY:** So how do you translate that into the corporate world in the work you do?

**ROB:** So the work we do is around, again from my perspective, trying to find the most influential people I can who can influence a lot of other people. So my personal purpose is around shaping and securing the future by trading a legacy of leadership. I can't create a legacy by doing that with individuals. It's got to be through organizations who can influence a lot of people. So we're trying to work with the biggest organizations to introduce an organization-wide approach to leadership. So part of the competence that I just described is an organization-wide developed thing by introducing common language such as the three W's and if you can do that through the most senior people. Then you're going to be influencing a lot and shaping and securing, we hope for noble purposes, a good future for a lot of people who may at some point be able, through the organizational leadership practices, to get that moment of flow. But even if they don't they're still going to be able to do better than they otherwise might.



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**MURRAY:** So I mean, thinking in this organizational flow, what would you say... so you're leveraging the top leaders because they've got the biggest influence across the organization.

**ROB:** Yeah.

**MURRAY:** And also I would say that... what's key to that for you? What is it that actually once you're in there and working with them makes the difference?

**ROB:** So I think the organizations that are disciplined enough to do this are few and far between. So it's quite a big ask to go in and say, "We're going to change the world by doing this." I think the quick wins are important and important early in the relationships. So very simple things. So one of our partners in LIW, Gillian Coutts, for example would say a win for them is buying a leader an extra second.

**MURRAY:** Yes. We've got an interview with Gillian in a previous episode. (episode 10)

**ROB:** Yeah. Well, that's great.

**MURRAY:** So she talked about that second, the choice.

**ROB:** So what do we do with that extra second? And I guess we're enabling people to make conscious choice by thinking. So whilst it would be ridiculous to say people don't think, we do know based on the evolution of the species that we're still trying to preserve our energies to fight the bear even in the absence of the bear.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**ROB:** So a win for me early would be helping people to understand that using the three questions associated with the leadership mindset to clear the thinking, will enable better decisions and if we can do that early with the most senior people, then we've got a great chance of embedding it as a practice.

**MURRAY:** And I think that's the power of a practice that can spread across organizations and I call it unleashed leadership at every level by creating those conditions.

**ROB:** I agree. So if we go back to the example that I shared, that crucible moment I shared where I personally felt as if I was in the flow. That limbic response, if you like, that habitual response had been input into me over many many years and therefore the ability to free up the space for thinking about what was actually happening whilst



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subconscious, there was space that had been made because I didn't have to think about thinking.

**MURRAY:** Yeah, and you weren't captured by the emotions of the moment and the stress of it.

**ROB:** Absolutely. It was not even there. But of course the brain is very fussy, so we need to look after ourselves. I think the next generation of leadership development will include not just the thought processes, but the recovery processes and the presencing processes. And we're already seeing that through the work of the Potential Projects and others.

**MURRAY:** Yes, yes, yeah. And that whole resilience recovery. There's, as you say, a lot more to come there.

**ROB:** Yeah, and then again there is the naïve belief, yet to be proven, is if we can get enough individuals doing that then teams can develop that collective consciousness and collective recovery and organizations can. And we live in hope that eventually our rather troubled international communities can recover to think sensibly about what they're doing. Maybe not in my lifetime based on current events.

**MURRAY:** [cross talk] Well we keep... we can keep working at it.

So third question, Rob, and it's about failure, which is an important process for everyone because if we don't fail, we haven't done anything and we don't learn.

**ROB:** Yeah.

**MURRAY:** What would you say, if you look back, is your biggest failure or more significant failure if you want, and how does that inform what you do today, how you go about things?

**ROB:** Yeah. There's a few choices, how I could make in selecting that, but I will go back to one in particular. It was to do with fear based decision making. So, there was a stage in the evolution of the business when we weren't in great shape. We'd lost a few people and I had gone through a health issue myself. I felt the need, because I wasn't able to do the business development of the business at that point, needed to recruit quickly. I made a recruiting decision which at the time I felt was a good decision, but was probably ignoring gut feel and that came home to roost in a big way to the detriment of the business and the individual concerned. It wasn't fair to them. And so I had expediently, and I use the word deliberately, made a decision based on trying to





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make myself feel safe and secure even though my gut said, "Don't do it. Do something else." But I didn't and it came home to roost, as I said. I don't think it was fair to the person concerned. It certainly wasn't fair to the business.

**MURRAY:** So how does that inform you today in what you do?

**ROB:** Came back to that extra second we were talking about earlier, not that I make recruiting decisions anymore, but I try to make decisions from a centered place and never from a fearful place unless it's a survival situation, which fortunately I don't get faced with very often anymore. So take a second. Sleep on it. I think not by accident the expression 'sleep on it' is still good advice.

**MURRAY:** [cross talk] Out mum's knew best didn't they!.

**ROB:** Yeah. So if it still looks like a good decision in the morning, then go and check it again before you make it. That's not to say we sometimes don't make quick decisions.

The other thing is a great military lesson I guess is if you're going to do something make sure you've got three sources of intelligence, which you all say approximately the same thing. Don't go with one source of intelligence. So in that instance, I probably hadn't done enough checking.

**MURRAY:** Checking. I think the gut feel is an interesting point. Now I saw from where we're working with people. They actually forget and lose the ability to listen to that gut and, you know, we're often saying, "Trust yourself." It's about that connection to self, as you say from that centred place. I think it's so important to be aware of it and listen to it.

**ROB:** Well, and I think the science again is right with you Murray.

**MURRAY:** Okay. That's proving it.

**ROB:** So when you look at the number of neurons that are turning up in our gut and how closely linked they are to what's happening in our hearts and closely linked to what's happening in our head, I don't think we'll see 'gut feel'. We'll probably be calling it 'gut thought' before too long.

**MURRAY:** [cross talk] Yeah true, true. That's an interesting prospect. Before we finish up, and these are great insights Rob, thank you... you've been involved with the World Food Programme.



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**ROB:** Yes.

**MURRAY:** And that's another side of things. So we've been talking really here about corporations. You've had the opportunity to be involved in that food program. It would be interesting to hear your insights from that, what you're actually doing, what you're getting from it, what you're learning?

**ROB:** Yeah. Look, there are so many and I'll try and be brief in responding. First thing is I didn't win in any sense, that work. I was working with somebody else who did. It's just one of the insights is how wonderful to find that there are people in the world who are selflessly going out and doing that. So I'll mention his name, Lee Williams, what an outstanding human being he is. We love him very dearly for the work that he's done and the selflessness of his sharing in doing that and getting me involved in it. And getting involved in it, a couple of insights. First is about cognitive bias. I went to Africa for the first time assuming that I was going to be in a position to offer more than I was going to receive and how wrong could I have been. The people in Africa were super smart, super dedicated and had life experience that would be educational for anybody to witness and I've kind of got over that now, so it's helped me to reduce my assumptions as I go into any relationship really. That's one insight.

The second one is very pragmatic. So they would often say, "Unless the food gets to the last 200 meters, you may as well not set off."

**MURRAY:** Wow. Yeah, 200 meters.

**ROB:** And how often do I say that to groups of people now in helping them to confirm their commitments as they go back into work life having attended, whether it's a coaching session or a meeting or a leadership development program, unless whatever you're committing to gets to the last yard, don't even bother setting off.

**MURRAY:** Yeah.

**ROB:** So limit the number of commitments you make. Make the most important commitments you have. Don't do the easy things first. Just make sure you get that final meter or you may as well not have set off in the first place.

**MURRAY:** That's so practical, so true of everything we do. Get the important things first. And I think in our world today with all our distractions, social media forums, emails, company cultures around us, it's actually very quickly lost.



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**ROB:** Yes. I couldn't agree more and so, again, action addiction is the enemy of doing the right thing early and getting it the final yard.

**MURRAY:** Beautiful. That's really profound in a way. I don't have any other questions. I think, Rob, you've shared your leadership moments. Thank you for that. That's brilliant insight. I'm sure people will enjoy listening to this. Thank you very much.

**ROB:** I really enjoyed the talk, Murray. Thank you for inviting me along.

**MURRAY:** Thanks to Rob. What a concise summary of the key elements of leadership and three great questions to help you stay connected to what's important. Best way to contact Rob is at [succeedo.global](http://succeedo.global). That's succeedo, S-U-C-C-E-E-D-O dot global.

That's it for this episode. Thank you for listening. Head to [murraywright.com](http://murraywright.com) for the transcripts, key learnings and resources from today's and all the past episodes. Once you're there, subscribe to the Leadership Moments podcast. That way, you never have to miss one. Until the next time.

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