



Trailblazing with CorbettPrice Podcast – Series 2, Episode 3

Transcription

INTRO: Welcome to Trailblazing with CorbettPrice, where we present new and fresh perspectives that challenge how you approach change to solve some of the biggest challenges faced by business and government leaders today. Here's our host, Andy Corbett, to introduce the third episode in our series on embracing organisational change.

ANDY CORBETT: Hey, everyone, Andy Corbett here, Managing Director of CorbettPrice. Thank you for joining us again for our second podcast series on embracing organisational change. We hope you've been enjoying the series so far and found the insights shared by each of our guests valuable and useful. So far in our series, we've covered two important changes that public sector leaders must face now and into the future. They are shifting mindsets and optimising service delivery for customers through an operating model approach.

And if you remember, in our last episode, we spoke with Dan Bowes from Revenue NSW to talk about the subject of optimising service delivery, and he kindly shared the improvements he has seen through this approach, what challenges they overcame through this process, and his best practice tips for others looking to do the same. Today, we're shifting gears into a crucial transformational change that organisations must address, embrace, and resolve. And that change is realising diversity, equity, and inclusion aspirations.

One of the four priority areas set out in Katy Gallagher's [APS Reform Agenda](#) last year was for the APS to be a model employer. And two outcomes set against this priority were that the APS sets the standard for equity, inclusion and diversity, and also sets the standard for First Nations employment and cultural competency.

[The Australian Public Service Commission's 2022 Diversity and Inclusion Report](#) found that employees from diversity groups had a higher intention to leave their agency or had an increased rate of separation. And in the [Global Gender gap reports released from the World Economic Forum](#), in 2022, Australia ranked only 43rd for gender equality internationally.

So how do we address these gaps and create inclusive workplaces where all employees are equal, valued, and importantly, feel safe to contribute and be their authentic selves? Here to help us understand how we can address this critical transformative change is Julie Etchells. Julie is the Chief Human Resources Officer for the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services. Julie has 20 years of experience serving the public, working for the Queensland Government, and as Chief Human Resources Officer, out lesbian, and person with a disability, Julie is passionate about creating inclusive workplaces where everyone feels valued, their differences are recognised, and they are seen as a positive contributor to the organisation and the quality of work that they do. Thank you so much for joining our podcast today, Julie.

JULIE ETHELLES: Thank you, Andy. Thank you for the invitation to be a part of this. What a great topic.

ANDY CORBETT: All right, well, let's get into it then, shall we? So the first area that I think we should jump into within this episode is the idea of psychological safety and how it can really be the starting point for building a positive and a strong culture. And we covered aspects of this in our previous series where we touched on the [four stages of psychological safety](#). And just as a reminder to the audience, they are inclusion safety, which is all about individuals feeling accepted and included in the group. Then there's this idea of learner safety where people can ask questions without the fear of embarrassment or punishment if they make any mistakes. And we've got this idea of contributor safety, which where people feel safe to use learnings to then make a difference. And then finally, the fourth one is the challenger safety, where people feel safe to challenge the status quo. So, really wanted to understand, what are your thoughts on this? Do you think psychological safety is the foundation for creating an inclusive workplace environment?

JULIE ETHELLES: That's a big question and I'm sure you'd get lots of different answers to this one. As a woman, I would have to say that actually, physical safety would probably be the primary one. And as an out woman with a disability and over the age of 50, it becomes even more important to have your physical safety and know that you can be physically safe undertaking your role and duty and responsibilities. And of course, to be able to get to work, you have to feel psychologically safe as well, once you're in that mode to get dressed, get out the door and get to work. So I would say the two are hand-in-hand. Obviously, you can't do one without the other unless you're working remotely in a little locked away cupboard somewhere. So I would definitely say that both are important because what we think is what we do as well.

ANDY CORBETT: Both are important. Okay, that's great. Could you just talk us through a bit more about the physical safety side of things?

JULIE ETHELLES: Yeah, sure. Certainly in my younger years in being a member of the public sector here in Queensland, I was an out woman and I knew that at times I was going to come across people who didn't respect who I was and felt threatened by that and would confront me about

that. I certainly experienced that both from staff, internally and externally, and folk in my own private life. So that's something that you can't unknow once you've experienced homophobia or you've experience something that threatens your personal safety, whether that's because you're a woman or because you're on your own or whatever has occurred.

Once that's happened, it's really hard to unlearn that. And so it does stick, and it becomes part of your psyche and becomes part of your thinking. So you do start to, for a woman, I come to work and I assess my safety. I think about am I going to be my full self at work? Can I be my full self at work? Am I providing an environment, a work environment where everyone who works for me, with me, alongside me, feels comfortable to be who they are at work? And part of that is about that physical safety. So if you've got a disability or you've experienced homophobia or racial slurs or discrimination, and you feel that your physical safety is threatened, you'll act accordingly, and you will no longer be 100% your full self, because your body will go into that mode of protection, whichever your mode is, whether it's fight, flight, freeze, or appease.

And often at work, particularly in government, you'd see the appease approach where people will quietly think what they think and may not necessarily speak out. So when you talked before about learner safety and challenger safety, if you've had lived experience of something that threatens your physical safety, it's hard to then fully 100% feel that you can 100% contribute from a learner and challenger perspective.

ANDY CORBETT: Absolutely. So, yeah, hearing you loud and clear there, physical safety goes hand-in-hand with psychological safety, both of which are the foundations for an inclusive workplace environment. What would you say is the role of leadership in enabling that type of environment to be in place?

JULIE ETHELLS: It's a significant responsibility and privilege. So being a leader is a privilege and an honour. And if you have that privilege and that honour, then also comes with that great responsibility. So it's that notion of model the way, lead the way, and ensure that you're doing that in a way that is equitable and gives access to all. So I think that for me as a leader, it's really significant that I, one, turn up and be 100% who I am, and I'm authentically leading the way that I lead. I can't lead how you lead or somebody else leads, and we've got enough of you and others. So I'll just lead the way that I lead. And by doing that, I create an authorising environment for others to know that it's okay for them to be who they are. In fact, I need them to be who they are. And if I can demonstrate that through my actions, my words, the environment I create, the team I engage, and how I create a sense of team amongst other teams, if I model that consistently and show that that is just part of my values, and I'm leading in true alignment to that, that is what people will see and experience as authentic and they will feel safer, that they can fully participate and they'll have equal access to the opportunities and to raise their concerns and to ask for the development they want, whatever it may be.

ANDY CORBETT: Yeah, absolutely. Okay, that's great. Thank you. And I've just been looking through some statistics on this idea of diversity groups within the [Australian Public Service Commission's 2022 Diversity and Inclusion Report](#). And when I'm looking at those stats, they're quite sobering from the perspective that employees from diversity groups have higher intention to leave their

position. And on top of that, employees with disabilities are reportedly separating from their agency at a much higher rate than employees without a disability. So, my question for you, Julie, is how do you think we can make our workplaces more inclusive for everyone, especially those from those particular diversity groups?

JULIE ETHELLES: Yeah. It's a sad reality, isn't it? The statistics indicating that is certainly sobering, but also is something that we should, as leaders, sit up and take notice of and see it as the opportunity that it is. Once we know it, we need to do something with it. So my focus is on the now what? So I know it, now what? What am I going to do about it? And for me, having employees with disabilities leaving at higher rates shows that there's an issue. So if I am taking that as all public sector, our own agency rates are a little bit different, but taking that as part of the public sector that I'm a leader in, it means that there's an opportunity for me to do something different.

And one of the key things, I think, in terms of addressing where there is disadvantage and a higher group or a higher separation rate, I need to have a look at what's going on there. I can only look at that from my perspective unless I stop, pause, create a space and a seat at the table for people that have other lived experiences to come and inform why are they leaving. What's happening? Do they feel safe enough to tell me why they're leaving and what's happening? And then what am I going to do with that information? And what do I say to them about what I'm going to do with that information, so they feel safe to be able to participate in the conversation but also contribute to what can we do about it going forward to create a safe space and create an employment opportunity across the public sector, regardless of where you are that encourages people with disability to participate fully in the workforce, be valued and feel valued as a contributing member of the staff.

So the notion of workplaces being more inclusive for everyone, we have this catchphrase that we use in our agency, which is nothing about us without us. So if you're talking about a cohort of people and you look around the boardroom table and you see actually you can't see that face represented in the boardroom, that's a problem. So nothing about us without us is an important catchcry because it's talking about consumer informed policies and practices and decisions and working environments. So having participants who have that lived experience, then speaking to and informing those policies and those decisions and those physical environments is a significant key contributing factor both to why they might leave, but also why they might stay. So then, the opportunity is there for us all, regardless, to do something with that and to think about that multiple factor of disadvantage or advantage. When you look around that boardroom, have you got it covered with a balance? Are they then represented in a way that you would use that information to inform your corrective solutions going forward?

ANDY CORBETT: Absolutely. And so, yeah, we're talking about the boardroom level there. And then I'm thinking at the other levels in the organisation as well, how important is it to promote diversity, inclusion at all levels across the organisation?

JULIE ETHELLES: Yeah, absolutely Andy, and good call out. I use the term boardroom. I mean any room that I'm at, any table that I'm at where a decision is being made. So in fact, part of my leadership is that sort of notion of servitude. So I ensure that I have different representation in my

leadership team and we make decisions primarily from a values base and a principle base within the legislation, of course, but that is my board, regardless of levels and classification and whatnot. But in terms of going back to your question about all levels of employment and how important is that notion of safety and inclusion? It's paramount. I started at the front line. I started as a wee baby Family Service Officer back in the department, back in the ninety's, and here I am, twenty-four years later, the Chief Human Resource Officer. So you can be damn sure that I'm going to use those experiences over the years to inform how I create that space now that a younger baby me would feel safe enough to come and join and feel valued and to feel that it's okay to be me. And I didn't feel that when I joined. I didn't feel that at all for many, many years. And it's only been in more recent times that I've taken the courage to be more out at work and be authentic about who I am and the challenges that I face, because it's certainly been shared with me.

When I've had staff who've contacted me after I've presented at a staff meeting or a work group or a function or something, and I've turned up and I've got a T-shirt on and I've got some tattoos and I've got some piercings and I've got funky hair, and I turn up being me. And I've had young staff email me following that, saying, thank you so much for just coming and being you, because you turning up showed me that actually I could be you one day. And I thought, wow, that's so powerful. I hadn't even really thought about it. I just run from one place to another and I forgot to put my jacket on.

I've turned up with the Director General to a group, and this young woman has seen me and just said, wow. I thought because I had tattoos and so forth, I wouldn't be able to be a leader in our department, when in fact, I can be out and I can show that with my art on my sleeves and on my body and still be a leader and that I'll be valued for that. So it really struck me the importance of showing that we all have something to offer. And as a leader, I need to do that as authentically as I can so that other staff can see that actually, that can be them. And we're really fortunate. Our Director General was a frontline Child Safety Officer as well, and now she's the Director General. And with many staff that are in the executive and in leadership positions around our organisation and across the state who have various lived experiences. And the more that I can create a workforce value base that encourages them to be them and to look out for other folk to demonstrate that this is a safe, inclusive workplace, the better we can affect it at all levels.

So we promote opportunities. We ensure that there are pride flags around, that there's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags. We celebrate multicultural days. We do all of those things, but it's the day-to-day things, and that going back to that ethos of nothing about us without us that really sets the stage for ensuring people feel valued and included everywhere.

ANDY CORBETT: And that's a great ethos, to have, nothing about us without us. That's brilliant, Julie. And I guess your answer there and the way you've described it, it sort of outlines that progress is being made. Would you say progress has been made? And my second question that's related to that is how would you actually measure progress in a tangible way?

JULIE ETCHELLS: Yeah, it's a million dollar question, isn't it? Are we making progress? Yes. The sheer fact that I'm here the Chief Human Resource Officer, I'm a woman, over 50, out lesbian person with a disability, and I'm here in the Chief Human Resource Officer role, which is the only

one of its role in my department for the state, and I started in a very different level. So is progress being made? Yes.

Are we there yet? No. Will we ever be there fully? I don't think so. Maybe the younger generations coming through who are living their best lives and living as themselves, maybe they will bring that change. I don't know that I'll see it 100% of the time in my lifetime. I hope I do. But I think there's always something to strive for. There's always something there, isn't there, that we need to think about, and that gives us pause to consider. So how would we measure it? Look, some of the things we know are the statistical type things. So you referenced some stats before in terms of across the public sector. Certainly, we have a [Working for Queensland survey](#) that we use. It goes across all Queensland public sector, asks a range of questions. And with the recent changes that we've had in our [Public Sector Act](#), we have a specific Diversity and Inclusion and Equity section in that legislation. We've now adapted the questions in our Working for Queensland survey that every employee has the opportunity to answer that is specifically asking about their diversity status.

Last year, the diversity status for my department showed a higher rate than if I were to pull a HR report than those that would identify in my HR report, which is based on their own employee data. So the fact that people feel safer in a much broader, more anonymous survey to fully identify and haven't necessarily updated their own employee profile in my department shows there's a gap and there's something there. Some of it is just data, and people think I can't be bothered going back in and filling that out. But some of it is because they don't feel safe to do so. So the discrepancy between those two gives me pause and makes me think I've got more work to do. And as a leadership team, I know that our agency is very committed to that. So we'll continue to look at that and any sort of gap between more anonymous data and our current data, because I think that's something for us to take as a sign.

The other part is, as I said before, looking around any decision-making table and seeing the difference that we have in our consumer group being represented in our decision makers. So having diversity visible, having language that shows that we are more considered in terms of inclusion, so we're more conscious of the need to use inclusive language and inclusive practices, and that our own lived experience is ours and we can't speak for everyone. So how do we ensure we get as many varying views around the table to inform our policies and inform our office designs, ensure that they're accessible for every ability and disability? To ensure that people of different cultural backgrounds have what they need to be able to turn up and be at work and feel included at work. Whether that's about prayer rooms, whether it's about safe spaces, whether it's about they see themselves in other leaders so they know that this is an organisation that values who they are and their culture and all their contributing factors.

ANDY CORBETT: Obviously, it's great to know that this progress is being made. Some great examples that you just mentioned there, the big question was, are we there yet? And you said before we might not be and there's still a way to go. Where do you think are the biggest gaps right now? If you would sort of single out a few gaps, they were relatively higher or bigger, should I say, than others, what would those gaps be?

JULIE ETHELLES: Yeah, I can only speak from the Queensland context in that sense, but if I think about what I see and read and experience as a member of this beautiful place that we live in, I would think that the biggest challenges continue to be around gender. Obviously, gender continues to be an issue. And the data shows that in my department that's very different because we are definitely a female-oriented department. So we have a really strong presence at all levels for women in leadership. So we're really strong in that space, but we're underrepresented and not where we want to be because we've set our own targets higher than the bottom line sort of levels, we've been aspirational.

So we've still got space to go in terms of people with disability, people who identify as part of the queer community. When people will start to feel safer to be able to identify and to feel that they can be their full selves and participate fully, then I think we'll see some shift in that data. So for me, I think people with a disability are largely underrepresented in the workforce. I think it continues to be shown in all statistics that people with a disability are leaving at higher rates. They find it harder to get entry in the first place. So there's some work that we've all got to do in that space.

Gender, whilst getting better across the public sector, is still an area that we need to address. And for people who are part of the queer community, for them to start to feel safe and to be able to identify, will then start to get a true representation in data. I'm not at all thinking that we're close to having represented in data, so the data would suggest that that's an issue and that we need to address it. But I'm not sure that we've got full representation in the data because people are not yet clicking those identifiers. And the fact that we're still talking about what the right identifiers are when you think about data sets, we haven't got a unified data set that we use everywhere and say this is the bare minimum. If you think about people with differing gender identity, we haven't got a data set that we use unanimously. That is a must. So there's some work there for us to do to get true accuracy in the data in the first instance. But those people that have got that intersectionality of multiple factors of disadvantage, you know, clearly that's going to be a group that we need to do a lot more work to bring about inclusion in the workplace so they can fully participate.

ANDY CORBETT: That's great. And you mentioned intersectionality just then. That brings me on to my next question, actually. So the Diversity Council of Australia, they've put together a [framework for intersectional organisational action](#), and in that it stresses the importance of taking an intersectional approach when designing, delivering, and evaluating equity, diversity inclusion workplace initiatives. For those people who may not know what intersectionality means, please, could you just talk through from your perspective how you would define intersectionality and then provide an example of how to take an intersectional approach?

JULIE ETHELLES: Okay, I'll do my best, but I'm sure there are far more academic people that would love to speak to this. But for me, intersectionality is really those multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage that creates modes of discrimination or privilege. So if you think about the boardroom analogy decision-making table, or it's the kitchen table at home or somewhere else, have you got full participation and full representation that's informing that? Because that's the intersectional approach to it. So if you have a system that, for example, has largely got white, middle-aged men with no disability who speak English at home, and their parents were English, and

they are making all the decisions. And you've got ten of those, then you've got an intersectionality of privilege at the table, and so all those decisions are going to be formed from that position.

If we want to address that, then we need to have a look at how do we create a space at the table for people to fully participate. And I presented at IDAHOBIT last year and talked about some of the basic ways we can do that. It doesn't require loads of money it doesn't require loads of monumental strategies and so on and so forth. Just that intersectionality, it's there, it's real. And if we accept that, then again, what do we agree to do about it? If we increase the percentage of staff and leaders and decision makers in our agencies and in our companies who have multiples of disadvantage and represent disadvantage, then our decisions and our processes will be far better informed and will create that equity across that space.

So how do we do that? Given most of the people that might be those white, middle-aged men who speak English and have no other disadvantage sitting at the table, how do we then start to ensure those other voices are present? Every one of them can do that by turning up and being open to change and recognising and calling the privilege around the table, making sure the conversation is inclusive, ensuring that they create a space at the table for those other voices, to lead with kindness and care and seek out those other voices and consider their own bias and call it, name it, and then encourage people to turn up and be themselves.

And I said I presented at IDAHOBIT last year, and I spoke about seven key factors and for me it was looking at really, what are some real practical tips that we can all do that don't require money. And so I spoke about these seven practical tips that we could all start today if we embrace diversity and really wanted to drive that change and be a part of that change for an inclusive workspace for everyone. And I am so proud to be part of the public service in Queensland, because the very smart folk, much smarter than me that were there then took some of that and created it into a resource that got shared all around the public sector and it's available to the broader public on the public sector webpage. If you Google [Inclusion and Diversity in Queensland Government seven practical tips](#), it'll come up there for you. And these are things that every person at every level can do that will make a difference.

ANDY CORBETT: That's great. We can add that reference to the podcast notes as well on the website and we'll add that link in so people can download that for further information. And you're right, I don't think it takes huge amounts of money to do this sort of thing. I think even just listening to your employees and empathising with them and through discussions and understanding the different experiences from their perspective, to really sort of put yourselves in their shoes and design approaches that actually factor in those differences in the way that they see things and their view of the world, and that doesn't require a huge program of work.

JULIE ETHELLS: Yeah, absolutely. And if we go back to that messaging around nothing about us without us, like ensuring that you've got that representation, and even if they're not formally in leadership positions, how do you ensure those voices inform your decision making so that you do create a more inclusive workplace? It'll be so far richer for it. I think about the department that I work for and the many, many employment opportunities we have, and I welcome everyone to come check out our [web page and have a look at the jobs we've got available](#), because we really

want to represent the communities that we're here to serve. And we're not there yet, so there's many opportunities that we have and we're working really hard to ensure that we make diversity and inclusion visible to anyone externally, to our agency, because we need the multitudes of other people. We're looking to improve that intersectionality of disadvantage in our work group, because that is the very communities that we serve around Queensland. And as a public servant, that's my key, that's why I'm here. That's my gig. It is about serving the public and I only represent a part of the public. If I'm looking at the services we provide, then we've got to better represent that.

ANDY CORBETT: Yeah, that's great. Thank you, Julie. And unfortunately, we are coming to the end of this episode, but before we close it out, I just wondered, do you have any further advice or best practices for how everyone can do their part in creating and promoting a more inclusive workplace?

JULIE ETCHELLS: Thank you for this opportunity. I would say the first part is accepting that it exists, accepting that is the reality. And it may not be the individual's lived experience themselves, but it is real and it does exist. And focus on the now what once you accept that, now what? Now what are you going to do about it? And things like those [seven practical tips](#) are a really easy way to make a commitment, to add it to your agenda as a standing agenda item, to force yourself to pay attention to it until it becomes habit and create new habits by making it intentional and drawing attention to it. And that does require all of us, including myself, even with all of my different identities, that notion of checking my own privilege at the table because I earn a very comfortable income that gives me a certain level of privilege. How do I check my own privilege at the table and ensure that other voices are heard and inform all our decisions going forward? So accept it, name it, and then ask yourself, what are you going to do about it? Look at something that's simple that you can all do. Add it to your agenda, practice it, and make it intentional until it becomes habit.

ANDY CORBETT: Yeah, absolutely. That's brilliant Julie, thank you. And I guess obviously, also creating space for culture, ensuring our decisions are also culturally informed, considered and inclusive is critical as we walk this path of truth, healing and reconciliation.

So look, Julie thanks once again for joining us today on the podcast. I know our listeners will have learned an awful lot from that. I certainly did. So I really appreciate your time today and appreciate you coming in. Thanks for all your insights and all the answers that you provided there around what is such a critical, transformative change of realising, diversity, equity and inclusion aspirations.

JULIE ETCHELLS: Thanks, Andy. Thanks for the opportunity. I appreciate it.

ANDY CORBETT: We hope you enjoyed listening to Julie today and found her insights and approaches valuable. A full transcript of this episode is available to download from our website, which is www.corbettprice.com.au/podcast that's www.corbettprice.com.au/podcast.

Please tune in next week as we talk with Tina McAllister, who is the Acting Director, People and Culture for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries within the Queensland Government. We'll be talking to Tina on our fourth transformational change of playing the new talent game - attraction, retention and employee attrition. Thanks for listening, everyone. Goodbye.