

AIME's Rhian Miller on what it takes to balance empathy, drive and resilience | Transcript

Intro:

"COVID has changed the way that we operate and think and act."

Right now, one of the biggest concerns for leaders in the social sector is the wellbeing of their staff. From Pro Bono News and Top Five Movement, this is the Leading Generous Teams podcast and I'm Clare Desira.

As the founder of the Top Five Movement I've worked with thousands of leaders across 40 countries, and I've seen how challenging it is to lead teams at the best of times, let alone right now. COVID-19 has had a seismic impact on the social sector and this is taking its toll on the people working in it. So this show is dedicated to you, generous leaders who recognise that the resilience, mindset and mental health of your teams has never been more important.

Hit subscribe now to never miss an episode. And if you can't wait to start building your team's resilience with our free tools, head on over to topfivemovement.com/tools to get started. And of course, for all of your social sector news, head on over to probonoaustralia.com.au.

Clare Desira: Hello and welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. Our guest today is the wonderful Rhian Miller, head of programmes at AIME. Hi Rhi, how are you?

Rhian Miller: Very well thank you, how are you?

Clare Desira: I'm good. Thank you so much for joining us today. Now I know that AIME started 16 years ago, and at the time AIME standard for Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience and it was very much Australian-based, but look, this is absolutely a movement which is what your organisation set out to be. And now you're actually in six countries, which is just incredible. So can you tell us a little bit about your role and your work?

Rhian Miller: Yeah, so I came to AIME as a shy and reserved Indigenous kid in high school, and for many kids like me there are a lot of predetermined paths that are outlined for us. AIME showed me that I could truly imagine what's possible and do whatever I set my mind to. So when I graduated school in 2014 I applied for a casual role with AIME, and ever since then I suppose I've been rising up the ranks, you could say.

I'm very fortunate to be in the role of overseeing all of our programmes globally. And for me, it's just been unreal, being a part of, I suppose building the bridges between those with power and marginalised kids around the world. And the origins of the model originally placed university students with other students from underprivileged and marginalised backgrounds, and the bridge of mentoring became the framework for black and white to come together in a safe place to redesign moral codes, understandings, and social operations.

And since all of these inequality and significant challenges we're facing around the world, we've been able to expand to six different countries and really be able to make a bold global experiment to build a space where black and white can come together, where those, with power and those without can forge new bonds, and where we can look to redesign the way the world works.

Clare Desira: Gosh, I just got goosebumps, thank you so much for sharing that. And what a journey you've been on, discovering and having something sparked off as a student yourself, and what a unique position you're in to be really able to understand what some of the students and the young people that interact with AIME have to offer and also what they have ahead of them, which is just incredible.

Now I know your year has turned out to be a little different from looking after these programmes in six countries and planning on travelling around. I'm really interested to understand what has the impact of COVID been on you and your team?

Rhian Miller: Yeah, I think COVID has changed the way that we operate and think and act. The work that we originally did was 100 per cent in person and on school and university campuses, both here in Australia and in Africa and America. And it meant that we as staff members couldn't be face-to-face with kids.

The impact of that at the end of the day is really hard to grasp when your every day is mentoring kids, and being one-on-one and assisting with homework and assignments. And so for us, it was a massive reality shock of not being able to be that support person for students. And with the number of kids affected by COVID and school closures almost at, I think by March it was 1.5 billion kids whose education was going to be affected, we had to adjust so quickly and be able to assist these kids that maybe don't have mentors at home and maybe don't have people in their lives that can push them to do their homework or to dive deeper into an assignment.

So for us the impact was what we were feeling from the students. And as staff members and as mentors, it was really difficult to be able to take the step back and say, "Maybe we can't solve a pandemic, maybe we can't solve the biggest problems and challenges these kids are having in the world right now, but what we can do is support them digitally and continue to be a mentor." But it meant that we had to adapt quickly and change so much so that kids could still have support during one of the most toughest times in the world.

Clare Desira: I'm so pleased you're able to adapt so quickly, but I'd imagine for many people that are involved in your programmes, and as you've said that face-to-face contact and that being able to support in that way would be the thing that fuels their fire and keeps them going in many ways. And I hear you when you say that what your team was feeling is what the students were feeling. So what have you done to support your team's mindset, resilience and mental health?

Rhian Miller: Yeah, once COVID hit it was obvious that it was going to be around for the long haul whether we liked it or not, operating in third world countries means that the cure can take longer to get there. So the first thing we did as an organisation was sign up to an employee access programme that offers counselling and services and online material for mental health services for our staff members and our volunteers in the programme. We offered discretionary leave to our employees for

their wellbeing, and we've obviously allowed very flexible working hours and home arrangements for staff.

And then I think from a fun side of it, our HR team was absolutely incredible when this pandemic hit and they offered workshops from three days a week in puppeteering, in painting, in training like an Olympic athlete. And through the digital stuff we've been able to do with IMAGI-NATION TV, which is how we mentor kids daily, we've been able to have some incredible mentors and guests come onto the show to one, not only mentor the kids, but also provide our staff with professional training and development.

We've had guests from all fields, such as Stan Grant, Nelson Mandela's daughter, we've had a comedian which is... Randy Feltface who's a puppet, we've had Malcolm Turnbull who's obviously the former prime minister of Australia, Dr. Happy, and I could name a bunch more. But throughout the weeks and the days, they've all been able to provide us with a level of understanding of how to check ourselves, how to ensure we're okay, how to support one another, and most importantly, just get through this really tough time that we're all experiencing.

Clare Desira: I love that. I love you bringing in external insights, you bringing in professional support, you're pulling those levers that are within your control around the leave and also doing some stuff for fun. It's so often lost, isn't it? Just doing things for fun.

Rhian Miller: Definitely.

Clare Desira: And we live in such a time where everything's 24/7 and it's so rushed, and it's so based on outcomes that that connection to fun can be lost, but it is so good for us.

Rhian Miller: Yeah, one of our key values at AIME is imagination. And our boss really takes that home and truly, I suppose, inspires us to be imaginative every day. And sometimes we'll jump on very important work or strategy calls and he'll be presenting the whole thing with a puppet, or we'll have to get up and do a dance, and some of the most craziest things. But it really just connects us all at the end of the day and it's something that we can laugh about during this time which I'm just absolutely loving.

Clare Desira: Oh, how fun. And it just disrupts the norm, it gets you to think differently and feel different in your body and in your mind as well, which is really important. Now since your first connection with AIME back when you were a student, you've become very rapidly, but also very immersed in change and leadership and resilience for thousands across the world. And I'd imagine that one of your strengths is being able to feel what the students feel, to be able to support them and create these meaningful programmes. But on the flip side of that I'd imagine that that work also takes a lot of resilience. So I'm really curious Rhi, what do you do to manage and build your own mindset, resilience and mental health?

Rhian Miller: Yeah, I'd say I'm a massive empath, which has its perks, but it also is at the opposite end of the spectrum, especially during a global pandemic. And I was telling you just before we went live with this that I've recently moved across Australia from Perth, Western Australia, to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, and that was purely because I wanted a better life. I'm only 23 and spend 100 per cent of my time working and on calls with people from all around the world at literally all kinds of

hours of the day.

I got partnered with a mentor at AIME, so we have this programme called Mentoring Residents where our CEO and founder connects people to us that are CEOs of other places so that we can begin to upscale and grow ourselves. I was fortunate enough to be connected to Si Philby who's the founder of Background and he's all about looking after yourself so that you can be better at work. And that was something that I'd never even considered before the global pandemic. And he was talking about a way of life and he was like, "At 23, if I was doing what you were doing I would have learned all of these lessons by now." And he was like, "Let's make sure we continue this mentoring relationship so that you can actually learn and grow yourself as an individual and as AIME."

And so yeah, he really inspired me to work out what kind of morning routines I wanted, what kind of friends I wanted to be around, who I wanted to be, and then helped me put all of that into place. So that all happened during lockdown and the moment borders opened up, I drove 5,000 km across country to get to Queensland before borders closed again just so I could have, I suppose, the life that a 23 year old would have, or so that I could get into the sunshine, get my dog out to dog beaches and really just begin to start looking after myself first and my own wellbeing.

There was no real, I suppose reason for this, I wasn't struggling with my mental health or anything at that stage and really just wanted to explore what was out there and what the possibilities were. And now that I'm up here I've found a psych that I really enjoy going to. And again, it's not because I'm struggling, but simply because it's so great to be able to have someone to bounce ideas and opinions off of and to help me comprehend things and make sense of this world that we live in.

And yeah, I've really started beginning to look after myself and to take leave when I need to take leave and prioritise my own wellbeing first which has been a really incredible part of this pandemic that I've found personally, is that we all start to have more time to focus on ourselves and those around us.

Clare Desira: Wow. Thank you so much for sharing that, there are so many things that you've just shared. And can I just say that having that mentoring relationship that has brought for you to life the idea of creating that life, and the idea of that connection around looking after yourself leads to being able to have a bigger impact in all parts of your life. Let me tell you that, I work with people and leaders across all different parts and stages of their career and some people never learn that, let alone learn it at 23. So that is... It's just incredible that you've not just been shared this lesson by a mentor but you've actually said, "You know what, I'm going to try this out and I'm going to think about what might be available for me at a new level."

And you've literally got in the driver's seat for 5,000 km to start to create this life. I also really love what you said about proactively seeing a psychologist, not necessarily because you're struggling but just to really help you comprehend and navigate this life that we live in, it's just such a strong strength of a leader and it's been such a theme of this podcast around don't wait until you're in crisis to go and seek that mental health support, leverage those supports and benefits to support you wherever you're at, which is just excellent. So thank you for sharing that.

Rhian Miller: No worries. It's worked so far, so we'll see how it goes.

Clare Desira: Hey look, I've only known you a short time but I'm pretty sure when something's not working you find a way to adjust and you draw in support.

Rhian Miller: Get in a car and drive 5,000 km, yeah.

Clare Desira: Yeah, I love it. And Rhi, how can you see what you're doing, how does that extend onto your teams?

Rhian Miller: Yeah. I think if the team can see leaders taking a break and openly sharing these kinds of stories and saying like, "You know what, it's okay if you want to have a day off, if you want to go to the beach, if you want to go and see a psychologist or seek support." As long as the team members can see that the leaders in the organisation are trying, then they're going to be more inclined to reach out, to check in, to communicate with other people. And I think most importantly, utilise the resources that we have.

Clare Desira: That's wonderful. Tell me, what are your hopes for your team?

Rhian Miller: Yeah. Hopes for the team is that we learn from this experience and that we, I suppose, take a moment to appreciate how amazingly resilient and determined the team of individuals are, no matter how far away we can be, whether we're in different continents, around the country, and really that we can flip the script and we can adapt and we can power on during these times of struggle if we support one another to be able to do so.

Clare Desira: I love it. Thank you so much. Hey, where can we find out more about your team and your wonderful work?

Rhian Miller: Yeah, you can head to aimementoring.com and find out all of the info on what we're doing on the website.

Clare Desira: Wonderful. Rhian Miller, thank you so much for your time and your wonderfully practical tips and your generous leadership. The world just would not be the same without it.

Rhian Miller: Thank you very much for having me, it's been a pleasure.

Clare Desira: Rhian Miller, what a woman and a leader to so many, not just in a global team that she's leading but also to the thousands of young people that she's already come across through her work with AIME. It's just incredible.

I don't know about you but I'm feeling moved by her clarity and her drive and her thirst for learning. Rhi told me about a few ways that you can get involved in AIME, whether it's volunteering or fundraising. And just over the last week, they've launched an open university where you can actually get a degree in imagination and organising change so be sure to check out the AIME website if that is of interest.

As I share my reflections from our conversation today, I really wanted to echo that it's fantastic again

to see those employee assistance supports being used by AIME. So being able to support their staff to actually seek out and access mental health professionals through work, and wonderfully that's also being extended to the volunteers at AIME as well, which is terrific to see. Some of those extra benefits like discretionary leave and flexible hours and that trusting your team to ask for what they need are actually also really valuable as well.

I love that Rhi shared with us about the effort that the team at AIME are making to really keep learning together and having fun, and bringing in external speakers and insights and perspectives as well. But fun is the keyword there. How can you keep having fun and connecting and refuelling yourselves through joy as a team, it's really important at the moment.

Rhi generously shared that she's proactively seeing a psychologist and this is just terrific. It's something that we've talked a lot about on season one, about what if we could really reframe and reposition and re-see mental health as a proactive support, not just something that we access when we're in crisis. And you could hear Rhi talk about how it's not because she's struggling but it's just about proactively seeing someone to be able to help comprehend things.

And this message is so powerful, not just for her but for other leaders and for other young people as well that are involved in AIME, that are looking up to her as one of the most incredible leaders.

The other thing that Rhi talked about was mentors. And I want to expand on the idea of mentors today and actually think of... Expand that out to not just thinking about who could be your mentor, but actually reflecting and reviewing, who's on your own advisory board? All great change-making organisations and not for profits have their own board, advisory board, strategic board. And I just wonder, who's in your own personal advisory board?

You'd never have a board that was just made up of one person, right. You need different ideas, you need diversity. You need people to challenge things and to support ideas and to bring different experience. And when we're putting together our own personal advisory board, which you may have already done informally but not thought about it this way, it's really important to get that mix as well. A mix of different people that you seek advice from.

So some few examples here are you might want to consider someone who has more experience in the work that you're doing. So if you know the type of work you want to do, who has more experience in that, maybe some years on that and maybe in an area where you want to work so you can actually learn more from them, learn different perspectives.

Another is thinking about someone who does similar work but in a completely different industry, or for a completely different cause. So you can learn about some parallel insights and things that are happening differently. Another person you might want to consider having on your board is someone younger than you, someone younger than you that's maybe up and coming in your field or you just really admire, and you can clearly see how much value a young person can bring to your life just with our short conversation with Rhi today. She's a terrific example of the valuable lessons that can be learned from people that are earlier on in their career than you.

It's of course also important on your personal advisory board to have people who won't always just agree with you too. There's a really special place in our support crew for someone who challenges

us and brings a different perspective. And that's of course in a safe and encouraging way, but actually deliberately seeking out the views of people who don't just agree with you. It's so easy to find and connect and seek support and reassurance from people who agree with you and tell you what you want to hear, but there's also that flip side value as well from someone who isn't going to play that role. And of course, in these 24/7 modern times where we can add a lot of pressure to ourselves, and for a lot of us critical thinking is our go-to when we're stressed, having someone like a coach on your team who can nudge you and help you believe that you're capable of more than you realise, especially on the shaky days, can be really valuable too.

So generous leaders, as you continue to do your incredible work and support those around you, I encourage you to slow down so you can go faster. And this week that slowing down might be about thinking who's in your support crew. Is it time to reach out and reconnect, or to thank people who have been there? You know the ones, the people who were there that even if you're not in regular contact, you know that they have your back and that they'd take a call from you if you had a question or a doubt or something to thrash around. Or is it time perhaps to explore some new relationships, perhaps with a mentor, someone in your industry or with a coach.

As we wrap up today, another big thanks to Rhian Miller from AIME, a generous guest today. Our interview today with Rhian concludes our conversations with guests for season one of Leading Generous Teams. If you've missed any episodes, head on back, they're all there on your favourite podcast app or on both the Top Five Movement and Pro Bono websites. So feel free to catch on up. We still have a bonus episode to share this Friday so stay tuned for that. And until then, we wish you a cracking week ahead. Thank you for listening.

Clare Desira: As we wrap, I want to say a big thank you to all of the generous leaders and their teams out there making a difference in our world, especially right now. I'd like to say thank you to the people of the Kulin nation from the country where this podcast is produced. And of course, I want to say thank you to you, our listeners. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast and never miss an episode, and if you're looking for some tools to get started with straightaway, we've got some for you. Head over to topfivemovement.com/tools. For the latest social sector news head over to probonoaustralia.com.au. And for now we're wishing you the strongest mental health mindset and resilience as you head into the rest of your day. Have a good one.