

OCA's Jane Hill shows us what positive leadership really looks like | [Transcript](#)

Intro:

"It's very difficult to monitor staff mental health when they are physically distant from you."

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.

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Clare Desira: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. Our guest today is the wonderful Jane Hill, CEO of Ovarian Cancer Australia. Hi Jane, thank you so much for joining us.

Jane Hill: Thanks for having me Clare.

Clare Desira: Oh, it's so wonderful. I cannot wait to learn more from your 20 years of leading teams in the social sector and not-for-profit space, and particularly your experience as a leader in the health space as well. I know you've had a role in lots of decision making nationally and globally and policy development, and I'd imagine working in health at the moment is an extra challenge for you and your team. So that's where I'd love to kick off today. Tell me about the impact of COVID on your team at Ovarian Cancer Australia and what that has looked like.

Jane Hill: Well, Clare, to tell the story of the COVID impact on staff, I really need to take a step back to explain the impact of COVID on our customers, and that's the women with ovarian cancer and their family and friends. You may know that ovarian cancer has a really poor survival rate of just 46

per cent, and each day in Australia four women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer and unfortunately three women die. And the initial treatment for ovarian cancer is utterly brutal. It includes what we call debulking surgery and chemotherapy, and also younger women, they lose their fertility and they have to cope with the onslaught of surgical menopause. So women, as a result of this, have weakened immune systems, and 70 per cent of women often have a recurrence, so they're always wondering about whether the cancer will return. So cancer, it turns people's lives upside down.

So if this isn't enough, the lockdown has exacerbated the fear, the loneliness, and the frustrations of the cancer community and the patients. So as a result, the calls to our nursing helpline, they've doubled, and women are trying to make decisions on when to undergo complex ovarian cancer surgery, whether to attend the hospital for chemotherapy or routine tests. Families are ringing us to ask how they can support their elderly mother from afar during the lockdown. So in this context, the challenges for our team have doubled both in volume and complexity.

So most of the challenges of COVID for our staff, perhaps similar to other workplaces, we're working from home and about one third of our staff have to juggle work and homeschooling. One staff member's stranded in Africa. Many worry about their elderly parents, and some are overseas. And some live alone and are feeling very isolated and some have financial struggles. Some staff are living in cramped conditions. So there's so many challenges there and my team are doing an incredible job in managing some big loads there. And the extra challenge for our staff, when they're working from home, is that our oncology nurses, they don't have the safety net of peer support that's usually available to them when they work in an office.

So we have a systemised professional supervision for them, but the peer support, it's such a powerful safety net. When the nurses work from the office, if they encounter a distressing call, then their work colleague can reach out to them and just say, "Oh, that was a tough call. Are you okay?" So I do have quite a few concerns about occupational stress, especially for the less senior staff, because they're all working from home, and we try to ask just to pick up the phone if they need to, but it's not as organic as peer support in a workplace.

Clare Desira: Of course. And I guess picking up the phone involves asking for that support, isn't it, whereas that peer support that comes so naturally and that empathy that would come so naturally to your team, and knowing and understanding from working in that same place must just feel like a missing piece for people.

Jane Hill: It certainly is, Clare, and we've worked a lot over the last six months on mental health, and it's very difficult to monitor staff mental health when they are physically distant from you. I've been making a lot of telephone calls to staff and I'm doing a lot of listening, and I think you've got to be more attuned. You've got to be ready to pick up any cues. You've got to be listening to their voice and asking the open ended questions. So we've done a lot of work to reinforce to staff that it's understandable to be feeling under pressure and overwhelmed in the current situation. Stress and those associated feelings, they're just not a reflection that people can't do their job or that they're weak. So we've really reinforced to our staff to reach out for help if they're struggling.

Clare Desira: Oh, that is such a wonderful message. I love that you've been doing a lot of listening, like you said, those phone calls, and a real theme that we're seeing from the leaders that we've been speaking to is actually proactively creating those spaces, whatever that looks like. And for you,

it sounds like phone calls have been really important and connecting and listening. The phone call without an agenda. But a phone call is an opportunity to check in, and like you said, really sharpen your listening skills and being attuned to what is happening for staff. What else have you been doing at Ovarian Cancer Australia to support your team's mindset and resilience and mental health?

Jane Hill: Well, first of all, I think as the CEO I've become the chief morale officer, and-

Clare Desira: I love that. That's just beautiful. I love it. What a responsibility, but how incredible too, that someone's taking on that role.

Jane Hill: Yes, well I think it's important. They say that tone at the top is instrumental in ensuring a well-governed ethical organisation. Well, I have pivoted because now I think of the mood at the top. So I think as a leader, it's really important to choose to be positive. So if a leader is despondent or passive or angry or fearful, confidence and energy can just seep out of the organisation. So I guess too, at the same time, you need to be authentic and real. And I do like to share my own personal challenges with the team, and that way they know that we're all in it together. So we've been doing a lot with staff. We've got all types of things running at the moment to improve communication whilst we're all working from home and feeling isolated.

We do regular staff meetings and catch ups. I have four senior leaders that manage a team each and they're focused on always having a conversation with each of their team members and encouraging them to have a social chat amongst themselves. We've sent out the care pack to staff and we're always celebrating our achievements. So in March we won the organisation of the year, which was very, very exciting, so that helped create optimism and people were proud of that result. And we've done a lot of resilience training. We've used Zoom, and we've had a number of different coaches, including Suzanne Crawford, an organisational psychologist. And we've used Zoom and done a lot of breakout sessions, and that has really helped me because I have spent time hearing about the joys of homeschooling and other impacts of the COVID on the staff.

And it's been a real eye opener to me. Up to that time, I knew it was difficult, but I didn't really understand how difficult it is. So we've been trying to give our staff absolute flexibility on their hours of work, and we've been saying about the importance of putting their family first in this situation. So I think also our performance discussions have been different. We're upfront in ensuring that our fundraising and marketing teams aren't going to be hauled over the hot coals for not achieving their KPIs. So all of those things, staff feel reassured, but it's very difficult to assure staff in uncertain times.

Clare Desira: Absolutely. And wow, what a list of things you've been able to do. So just a quick recap there of that vulnerability that you said around sharing, how you're travelling yourself, you're sending out care packs, you're readjusting performance reviews, you're encouraging people to connect with each other in new ways, whether it be socially or formally, and also bringing in people for some formal resilience training. And I can absolutely echo your thoughts there around the value of those Zoom breakout rooms.

The idea of being randomly grouped with people for those small conversations in Zoom can sound like a strange idea, but as a professional facilitator and supporter of behaviour change, those conversations can be even more powerful than the ones that you have in person as well. So it's really terrific to hear that that's something that you've included as well.

When we spoke earlier, you mentioned to me that you hoped that you'd have some tips to share with our audiences and that you felt like a lot of it was common sense, but I can assure you that all of those things are just incredible ideas that people may know, sure. But whether they actually implement them, and whether they lead with that mood from the top is a very different story. So thank you so much for sharing those ideas and what you're generously doing at Ovarian Cancer Australia.

Jane Hill: It's a pleasure.

Clare Desira: I'd really love to shift our focus now and understand a little bit more about you and how you manage your own mindset, resilience, and mental health, because your work extends well beyond your role at OCA, and you've been holding leadership roles in the social sector for over 20 years and you have some lofty goals and roles beyond your CEO role. And that's not just in Australia, where you're a part of a national alliance and in federal health committees, but you also hold a director role in a global cancer coalition as well. I imagine taking on those roles requires grit and determination. So I'm really curious, what do you do to manage and build your own mindset, resilience, and mental health?

Jane Hill: Well, I think of my blessings all the time, and over this COVID period, it hasn't been easy for anyone, but I've slowed down and I'm smelling the roses, literally. I appreciate what's around me in my neighbourhood. So rather than wearing out a pair of shoes walking around Parliament House in Canberra, each day I'm exploring my neighbourhood on my 10,000 step challenge. I've been watching a huge family of parrots nesting in some trees, not far from here, home, and looking at all of the various architectural influences around the neighbourhood. So at the moment I'm feeling much rested than I have ever been. I'm getting more sleep. I do feel more centred. I'm not dog tired anymore and that has had a lot of benefits to me in me thinking about the future of ovarian cancer and rather than running back and forth from Uber to the plane and back, I've got more time to think about the business and working on the business rather than in the business and speaking with the staff and the women with ovarian cancer to gain their insights.

Clare Desira: That's incredible. I love that. You're slowing down to go faster, is a saying that we love to use at Top Five, and taking the time to rest. And I also wonder, with your reframing there around, what opportunities have come about from that rest as well?

Jane Hill: Certainly there's a lot of opportunities that have come about from COVID. The office workplace I don't think will ever be the same. It will be better. We have become more adaptive in our thinking. We're more attuned to change. So there's a lot of challenges that COVID has thrown out to everyone, but I think we're going to be stronger as a result.

Clare Desira: I love that. And people, that is mood from the top in action there, saying that the office environment will never be the same. It will be better. What a reframe and a focus for us to be able to keep in mind as we keep navigating this change and this uncertainty around, sure, we don't exactly know what it will look like, but what a strong message to keep us focused on the work that we do and the impact that we can have. Thank you for sharing that. I'd love to ask you, Jane, how do you see what you're doing extending onto your teams?

Jane Hill: Well, I think that you have to model the behaviour that you want from your team. So all of the time we're trying to encourage resilience and encourage people to seek help if they're feeling

challenged. So hopefully the behaviour being modelled by the people at the top of our organisation will be mirrored by everyone else.

Clare Desira: That is so wonderful, and I agree. Now I happen to know that one of your favourite quotes is that fortune favours the brave. So with this in mind, I'd love to understand what are your hopes for your team?

Jane Hill: Well, foremost, my hopes for my team are that they keep safe and their families remain safe. Staff are really under pressure at the moment, so I really feel for them. So I hope that in a month or two they can put the main part of this crisis behind them. But as I said, our working life will never be the same as it was before, but I think our staff will be working more from home, so we're going to be more flexible and adaptive. And my hope is that staff continue to love their work, they understand why work is so important, the work that they're doing for women with ovarian cancer, and that they work as a high performing and cohesive team. And if we do all of that, then my hope is that in 5 to 10 years, that we can say that we were the team that turned around ovarian cancer, that we have saved lives and that no woman with ovarian cancer walks alone.

Clare Desira: I just got goosebumps. Thank you so much, Jane. I know that our listeners are going to be madly writing notes and trying to remember all of your tips so that they can go away and lead more generously as you do every single day. Thank you so much for your time.

Jane Hill: Thank you, Clare.

Clare Desira: What a force. Before I met Jane, I was reading and thinking about how can one person fit all of this into one lifetime, and within a few minutes of meeting her, it was very clear to me, as with all great leaders, that she has an undeniably positive attitude. Now, when you think of a positive leader, what do you picture? A much younger me would have pictured someone who was almost over the top upbeat, but from years of working with leaders, my definition of a strong and positive leader is someone who at every chance focuses on what is helpful, encouraging, and productive.

And Jane absolutely does this. A brilliant example of this is one of her closing thoughts that she left us with. She said office life will never be the same. Now many people would have put a full stop there and then naturally started to think about how things could be worse from now on, but not a leader like Jane.

Sure, maybe quietly, she realistically acknowledged or considered how things might be worse, but she also navigated those thoughts really quickly to move into the idea and focus that office life may never be the same from now on, and that it will be better. That little reframe, those few words on that sentence, can actually make a world of difference for our focus and really help us move forward.

Someone like Jane, with all of the roles that she has, she doesn't have time to waste and wallow, as you can hear. Now, the other technique Jane spoke about is smelling the roses, which is essentially gratitude. Now in my view, cultivating this sense of gratitude and living in the moment isn't a fluffy idea, although it's one of those ideas that can be easy come, easy go. You understand the concept, sure. It can be helpful to be thankful for what you have, but do we actually implement it?

I believe that gratitude is about survival. For those of you that have been following our work for a little while at Top Five, you may know that back in 2012 I actually did a TED Talk about how gratitude practise could change the world. So I've been a long believer in this idea that gratitude is about survival. Think about it like this. When you're in the midst of change, it can be so easy for your brain's negativity bias to be in charge. It's looking out for what's going wrong, so you can dial into the worst case scenarios. And your brain can be trying to protect you in this situation, it's not necessarily doing a bad job, but it can also make you forget that there's another way to look at things.

When you're in an uncertain situation, one of the things that you most want is control over the situation, and there's a perceived sense of relief when you can focus all of your attention on that worst case scenario. You can feel prepared, you can feel like you know what's going to happen, which gives you that feeling of being in control. But your brain can trick you sometimes because you can't control the uncontrollable, no matter how many ways you look at it. And while you're focusing your attention on that worst case scenario, you can forget that bigger picture and miss the things that are right in front of you.

Gratitude isn't a fluffy idea. It's about seeing things differently. It's about problem solving. It's about giving your mind a rest. It interrupts us when we're spinning our wheels, procrastinating, or overthinking things outside of our control. And as a bonus, it's also proven to be one of the most instrumental ways to increase your happiness. Gratitude is just one way to harness neuroscience to get better results during change, and it's one of the many tools that we introduce to teams to help them see things differently and solve problems differently. We'd be so happy to have a chat to you about how we could support your team with neuroscience hacks, change mindset, and resilience, and if you'd like some tips on mindset shifts, then head on back and check out our expert insights from our second bonus episode as well.

But lastly, if you want to give this a go personally today or with your team, we always come back to our favourite tool, writing down five things a day that you're grateful for. Five things or moments that are worth remembering that day for positive reasons. You'll end up having a wonderful collection of memories, but not only that, you'll be actually training your brain to see things differently. You train your brain to look out for the good stuff, even amongst the chaos and the change. If you already have a practise like this, that's terrific.

To take it to the next level, you might like to write down those five things, and also just a little note on why it was that that thing made your list that day, that can give you a deeper level of insight and give you some clues about things you may want to add more of into your life as well. Thank you again to Jane Hill, our wonderful guest today. What a force. We'll be sharing another expert insight bonus episode this Friday, so stay tuned for that. But in the meantime, have a great week.

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.

LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

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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.