

## VAHS' Michael Graham on maintaining connections and taking a break | [Transcript](#)

**Clare Desira:** Just a heads up that this conversation includes a mention of suicide, self-harm and drug use. If you need immediate support, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples can also access the Yarning SafeNStrong counselling service on 1800 959 563.

### Intro:

*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 Michael Graham, CEO of VAHS, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service. Hi Michael.

**Michael Graham:** Hi Clare.

**Clare Desira:** Welcome to the show. Thank you so much for joining us. I know that since a teenager you've been involved in and around Aboriginal affairs and organisations, so can you tell us a little bit more about yourself?

**Michael Graham:** Yeah, no worries. I guess my first job was with Victorian Aboriginal Education, which is a community controlled organisation as well. I think I was about 17 there and I did a couple of weeks of volunteering. I think they did a bit of a test on me first to see if I was reliable, and after a couple of weeks, I was offered a traineeship and been in Aboriginal affairs in one sector or another ever since. So that was 17, and I'm 50 this year, so it's been a little while. And before that, obviously

my family was heavily involved in Aboriginal organisations and community controlled and also some of the activist areas as well. So it's been a long journey. I've worked in Aboriginal education, I worked with Aboriginal youth sport and rec in relation to the Fitzroy Stars gym. I worked in Aboriginal Child-care Agency. I've worked at Aboriginal Legal Service. These are all Victorian organisations.

**Clare Desira:** How incredible. I bet across all of those roles, and like you said, that long journey, you would have some stories to tell.

**Michael Graham:** Definitely. Definitely have some stories. I won't go into them because some of them aren't always the best, but ever since I've started, and even before I started, when I would attend some of the community meetings with my parents or grandparents, it saddens me to say that a lot of the times we hear the same things being said over and over again. That's the saddest part of it all. But that's not to say we haven't made some progress either, so there has been progress, but there's still a long way to go.

**Clare Desira:** Yeah, of course. Now VAHS, the organisation that you head up now has been providing a range of medical, dental, and social services for over 40 years for your community. I can't imagine what leading a health organisation is like at any time, let alone during a pandemic. How has COVID changed the way that your team works?

**Michael Graham:** I guess being a community controlled organisation, first thing we do is we we're like a big family and I've got around about a 100 Aboriginal staff and they're all connected to families throughout Victoria, mostly, but also across Australia. It doesn't matter if you're black or white, when you come to VAHS, you're considered part of the family because you're looking after the Aboriginal health of our people. So everything we do is what you would do for your own family and your own home. It's just that we've got some experts in certain areas and people with the resources to be able to back that up as well.

Now, what we've found as soon as COVID hit, was we kind of went into protective mode straight away, and I can remember listening to Scott Morrison on a media conference that he was doing, and I was listening to it in my office, and I walked straight into my office, pointed to two of my staff and said, "Okay, youse two, youse is going to have to go home and we'll probably have to work from home, but we'll sort that out later. I just need youse to look after yourselves. Pack up your stuff and head home." And then from that moment spoke with managers about other staff that would need to do the same.

So basically we went from two clinical areas, one in Fitzroy and one in Epping, we had a park clinic area in our Preston office, which was where I sat, the administration sat as well, as well as all of our mental health team, and we also have a rehab centre for youth down in Hastings. But the Preston site that I sat at were pretty much closed up. The clinical area wasn't big enough to keep open and be able to utilise. So all of those people who were working in there, which as I said, was mostly the administration team, but also the mental health and drug and alcohol counsellors, basically went home and started to work either from home or they would utilise the two clinic sites.

Now to do that, you have to make a lot of phone calls, a lot of video calls. And one of the messages that was sent out straight away to staff was call all your clients, check on their wellbeing, and this is what you're going to have to do pretty much weekly. We never knew how long COVID would last at

that stage. We just knew that we had to protect our community and our staff involved as well. There's been a lot of telehealth and video health consults. There has been a lot of wellbeing checks. And funny enough, we actually do more meetings now than we've ever done, and I think that's due to the video conferencing that's around nowadays.

So when you're doing all your reports, as well as trying to do all these wellbeing checks, and on top of that, look after yourself through COVID, it's quite demanding on staff. And I'm finding that I have a lot of staff that are tired. Fatigued is a word that gets used quite often. I have a lot of staff who fit in the categories of high risk, so they're either Aboriginal at 50 years over, or they have chronic illnesses. Before the Commonwealth announced sending out masks, we'd already ordered a couple of thousand masks that we've sent out to our community as well.

So there's been a bit of that work, and I sit on more committee meetings now than I've ever sat on before. I feel like I'm on four or five a day of these Zoom meetings or Teams meetings. I'm hearing a lot about a lot of Aboriginal workers feeling fatigued. I did ask them, I said, "Do they use the employment assistance program, the EAP program that's offered in most departments and organisations?" And the response I got was that it's hard to talk to somebody on the other line who doesn't understand the history of Aboriginal trauma on top of the trauma that they get from being at work and going through COVID at the same time.

So they have to tell a whole story to explain that and they don't want to. So we decided, and this happened, I guess, from being approached by VACA, Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency about how we could support the Aboriginal workers there. We eventually developed an Aboriginal EAP program. So now we have a fully developed Aboriginal EAP program that is looking after all of our staff and all of VACA's Aboriginal staff, and it's getting a lot of interest from other Aboriginal workers and organisations across the state.

**Clare Desira:** That's incredible. Thank you so much for sharing that. There might be people listening as well that work in organisations that could potentially access something like that as well, so thank you for sharing that and thank you for your leadership in that space. That's just incredible.

**Michael Graham:** We don't often talk about ourselves too much, and it's even hard just to hear you say anything because we're just bought out to do what we have to do to look after each other. And that's it. You don't think about if you've done a good job or not, you're just doing what you can to help the next person beside you.

**Clare Desira:** Talking about you for a second, if we could, I'd love to understand how do you look after your own mental health, wellbeing, and resilience and keep on going?

**Michael Graham:** I guess what I do is I just keep going until I get to the stage where I can't think anymore. And as soon as I realised that I can't think, I'll contact my board, particularly my chair, and I'll say, "Look, I need a couple of days off," just to have a break. I'm going to turn off my emails, going to turn off everything. And then I'll ask my second in charge to look after things while I'm gone. And that's about all I can do at the moment. The funny thing was, the week before COVID actually hit us, my wife and I had decided that we was going to do a bit of a road trip and we was either going to travel to Perth or up to Cairns. We hadn't decided. We generally don't plan our holidays that well. We just like to get up and go.

So we needed to upgrade our caravan to go so it would make the trip. So we got ourselves a new caravan and we thought we're all deadly on that, ready to go. And then we tested it out at a local camp spot to make sure that we had everything right. COVID hit, and then for the next, I think probably month and a half, it sat out the front on the road. We've got a couple of complaints for it being there. That was going to be my holiday time and never got to have it. So ever since I've just been just taking a couple of days off here and there. Last month was a tough one. There was five deaths in our community and some of them were very close to me. Most of them were very close in one way or another, including a suicide. That one hit me a bit harder, those deaths.

Mentally I'm usually pretty strong and physically I'm not as strong as I used to be, but I'm not too bad, but emotionally it just got to me. I asked for a couple of days off and when I was ready to come back to work, I said to the boss, I said, "Look, I need a little bit longer." So I took that extra week, come back and things have been okay since. But I do the same with my staff, with my managers. I say, "Look, if you need a couple of days off, you just take them. Don't worry about the leave staff. Don't worry about anything else. You got to look after you, look after your family, and when you're healthy, you can help the rest of them all to be healthy. But if you're unhealthy, you're not going to be able to help much."

**Clare Desira:** It's such a strong message isn't it to remind you that you're stronger when you're able to look after yourself as well.

**Michael Graham:** Yeah, that's right. It's been hard for everybody too, because in Melbourne, because our families are dispersed across all of the area we're not like, like, say in the Northern Territory where they've locked them up in their community spaces and said nobody's allowed to come in or anything like that. But in Melbourne, because you're dispersed so much, you really only have who's in your house and that's it. So when you want your support networks or your social gatherings, we can't do that anymore. At the moment, we're just locked in our house and all we have is a video screen to look at and talk to our family through that.

Now I've raised 10 kids. Two of them are foster kids. And one of them, she's self-harmed and used ice and things like that, and what we would normally do to support that person has been very difficult because they don't live at home, so that support mechanism is very hard and it puts a lot of pressure just on us, let alone everybody else who's going through similar things. And because of the vicarious stress and trauma that we carry for each other, everybody's feeling heavy hearted and the mental health staff has been really severe for our people through this.

**Clare Desira:** Yes. Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. I can't imagine how disconnected you must be feeling to some of your family at the moment. So thank you for sharing that with us, and we wish you and your family the greatest health as well. Michael, I'd love to ask you, what are your hopes for your team as we start to hopefully navigate things and things are easing a little bit in Melbourne. What are your hopes for your team moving forward?

**Michael Graham:** I don't know if I really need to say this, but I hope they recognise just how important that they are. And as I said, we don't talk about ourselves too much, and not too many other people do. We just go along doing our business. I want my people, my staff, my family, to understand just how important that they are to each other and to the community as a whole, and to see the differ-

ence that has been made for Aboriginal people in this country in regards to COVID, to see how well we've done it, is a testament to our connection to each other, and being able to get the message out and look after each other.

Even from being locked up in four walls, we're still being able to maintain that connection and look after as much as we possibly can, get that information. I just want our people to see that, to see how good they are, how deadly they are to be able to do that. I don't know if it's true, but I did read somewhere last month that the Aboriginal people of Australia have done better through COVID than any other race or nationality across the world. And to me, that's a testament the way we look after each other. And I hope that our people see that. I hope they recognise that. And I hope other people recognise that too.

**Clare Desira:** Wow. Thank you for sharing that. It's just such a sign of strength of that connection, even when you're spread out, that connection and that understanding is still there and how much that actually means. Thank you so much for your time, Michael. I know we've caught you between board meetings and committees and all of the wonderful ways that you bring your beliefs and the change that you're trying to make to life, so we really are grateful for your time, and I know the listeners are going to learn a lot from you. So thank you so much.

**Michael Graham:** No worries. Thank you very much for having me, Clare.

**Clare Desira:** You can find out more about the incredible work of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service at [vahs.org.au](http://vahs.org.au). And in particular, the Yarning SafeNStrong service. Yarning Safe'N'Strong is the free and confidential counselling service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for people and families who need to have a yarn with someone about their wellbeing. The number is 1800 959 563. And of course, if you need immediate support, you can call Lifeline too on 13 11 14. We'll include all of those numbers and links in the show notes as well.

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**Clare Desira:** Well there you have it, everybody, another incredibly committed leader, Michael Graham, what a privilege to spend some time with. Just to call out some of the examples and the messages and the way that Michael's leading during this time. Adaptability, of course, springs to mind straight away. He was tuned into the latest information from the sources of truth and took a really proactive and protective take on leadership and looking after his team or his family, as he so beautifully calls them. He also, of course, spoke with his other leaders and got them all on the same page as early as possible so that they could continue to look after themselves, but also look after their clients as well.

Like many of our other leaders Michael's leadership has taken on different formats during this time, and he's been reaching out in new ways to his team and encouraging them to reach out to their clients in new ways. So lots of really proactive wellbeing check-ins, whether that be via phone or Zoom or teams meetings, taking that time to really connect and encourage with the team and their clients and community and new ways has been something that is also really important to his leadership too.

Something that really stood out for me from the conversation with Michael as well is how in tune he is

to knowing what he needs, and also that incredible relationship that he's created with his chairman to be able to call them and say, "I need some time out." And look, some of us work and work and work to the point where we need to actually take that time out, a block of time out, and everybody's really different, and that seems to be Michael's preferred way to operate and it's incredible.

It's by no accident that he is able to make those phone calls and take that time out. It's because he's actually, one, built the team to be able to support that time, but also he's created that trust and he's been able to really communicate openly and ask for what he needs as well. So often we can hope that other people are going to read the clues that we're putting out and weave it all together in some amazing solution, but often it takes an ask to be able to actually communicate to other people what we need at any one time.

By doing that, of course, he's also role modelling to his team that they can also ask for what they need too. And Michael talked about this and the importance of his team all looking after themselves and keeping themselves as strong as they can so that they can really play that important role in their communities. So not only by saying that is he giving them permission to ask, but also by role modelling that himself, it sends a really consistent and really valuable and important message too.

So connection has been a big theme of this conversation. Connecting with your team in new ways, connecting with those around you, and importantly as well, it's actually reminding us, I think, to express in whatever way works for us or works for you, to let the important people in your life know how much they mean to you. It's always worth taking time to do. So today I want to leave you with a couple of reflection questions. The first is how are you creating that connection in your team? And again, just creating that space.

How are you listening, creating those spaces to listen? Not just creating spaces with an agenda that really organises that time, but how are you creating that space to connect? And also, of course, how are you letting the people who are important to you know that they are as well? I think it's a really important reminder for us.

That's all for today. Please take care of yourself. Look out for another bonus episode that we will be dropping on Friday with some practical tips and expansions on the conversations we've been having. Oh, and just one more thing. If you've been really enjoying these themes around resilience and mindset, then next week I'll be running a webinar with the Pro Bono Australia team discussing how you can future-proof your team with change mindset and resilience skills. To find out more about this opportunity, head over to [probonoaustralia.com.au/education](http://probonoaustralia.com.au/education). We might see you there.

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**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.

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# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

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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.

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