

Cube Group's Ben Schramm on Why Investing in a Growth Mindset Pays Off | [Transcript](#)

Clare Desira: One of the biggest concerns for leaders in community focused organisations is the wellbeing of their staff. From the Top Five Movement, this is the Leading Generous Teams podcast, and I'm Clare Desira

As a founder of the Top Five Movement I've worked with thousands of leaders and their teams across 40 countries and while I've seen how exciting it is to lead teams, it can also be extremely challenging. Let alone right now.

The pandemic has had a seismic impact on community focused organisations and it's taking its toll on the people working within them. 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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Interview

Clare Desira: Welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. Today our guest is the wonderful Ben Schramm. Ben is the founder and managing partner of the purpose-driven consultancy Cube Group. How are you, Ben?

Ben Schramm: Hi Clare, I'm really well. Thank you for having me on the podcast.

Clare Desira: So wonderful to have you here. I know you've got a wealth of knowledge to share generally for for-purpose organisations, but especially in this area. So tell me Ben, you drive this purpose-driven consultancy, Cube Group. You founded it many years ago. Unlike many organisations, Cube's continued to grow over the last two years, and I'm really interested to know about the impact of the pandemic on your team.

Ben Schramm: As you mentioned, we're a purpose led consultancy. We work with purpose led organisations who are making a positive social, economic, and environmental difference in Australia. And we went into the pandemic, once we sort of realised the magnitude of what was happening, with a desire to have a growth outlook and a growth mindset towards it and what was the positive change that we could bring through our business as part of that disruption, and think differently about the way we were supporting our people and our clients through it.

Clare Desira: That's incredible. Imagine if anytime anybody headed into what felt like a looming crisis, that they went "hang on a minute, let's go into this with a growth mindset, rather than that fear based mindset". I love that.



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Ben Schramm: It's hard to do. Your initial reaction is you want to freak out. I think it takes a bit of bravery and step into it and say let's embrace, and let's try and think differently about this.

Clare Desira: So Ben, tell us a little bit about your staff. I know many of your staff and that they're super passionate people, and I know that a time like this can really drive passionate people to work even harder. So what has it been like for them during this time?

Ben Schramm: Well, I think that's true. That's a really interesting thought around the impact of a pandemic in a period like this on purpose-driven professionals. As you said, we're very emotionally connected to our work. We're a B Corp, we want to be the change at Cube Group and make a positive difference. If you're working in child protection, if you're working in disability, in education, youth, helping marginalized and disadvantaged members of the community, these are changes that are really important to the quality of life in our country and you can get really invested in it. So with that sometimes can naturally come a level of stress and a level of concern for the work that you do, because the stakes are high.

So I think going into it, understanding that that's the case and wrapping support around the team that we have at Cube Group, who are purpose led and making a difference, is important. And giving them permission to have a break, permission to step away from that, in some respect, sort of self-induced pressure because you do want to make a difference, and wrap some different types of mental health and wellbeing supports around them is something we've been really focused on at Cube.

Clare Desira: I love that. Can you tell us a little bit more about that Ben? What have you been doing to support the Cubie's mindset and resilience and mental health.

Ben Schramm: It's been a wonderful journey, Clare. We're doing some really interesting things that I'm super proud of at Cube. I'll take you through a few of them. Of course there's a journey that we're all on when it comes to mental health in the workplace and I think that there's still a long way for many of us to go in many industries.

But some of the things that we're doing, we have Cube leave at Cube Group, where we have provided all of our people, our full-timers and it's pro-rated, with an additional five days of Cube leave each year. So that provides you with some flexibility to use it in ways that create that buffer for you, in that work-life balance that we want to create.

The other thing we've been doing is we've really embraced this idea of all roles flexi at Cube. And that was a big part of the change in the pandemic as previously we were in the office most days. We did have some flexibility, certainly, embedded in our working model, but when I started my career it was, you're in the office every day. There was a bit of a work hard, play hard mentality. I joined the big four in the late nineties, and that was kind of the vibe going around then.

I think we've just seen in a very positive way, a shift towards a much different mode of operations. We still need to move further down this path, but we really took a decision to say, right, at Cube, all roles flex. So you can design your work week to work when, where, and how it's going to work for you.



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If I'm honest, that was a leap. Like we've gone some way to that end because I still had a little bit of old school in me about needing to be in the office these certain hours, showing up in this way. But moving towards it and taking that decision to provide ultimate flexibility to our team, it's been amazing. And if anything, productivity far increases, the culture of the firm becomes stronger and is bound, because you're just showing this deep level of respect. If you've got the right people and you've hired values aligned people into your firm, providing that flexibility absolutely is a big ingredient of a high performing organisation. I've loved that. So that's been a big focus for us.

Something else we've done, of course Clare you'd be aware, we've engaged the Top Five Movement to help us with some wonderful workplace resilience and wellbeing training. And I'm really proud of that actually, you did a wonderful job with your team. I was looking at some Beyond Blue stats in prep for our chat today and it's quite striking. One in six Australians have an experience with depression or anxiety or both. I think that is a massively underestimated figure. I'd say that that's conservative, I'd say it's much higher than that. And then there's a situation where 81% of organisational leaders indicate that they think their workplace has got good mental health supports, but only a third of employees really know or had access to them. So you've got this gap, I think, between employers and employees in terms of an appreciation and awareness of mental health and wellbeing, and the actions that we are taking to address it and support our teams.

So the work we've done with you and your team, Clare, is it's in the sun, right? Like we need an EAP and we've gotten the EAP and that's important and that's a stepping stone, but I think that we're at a time now where leaders need to step into this space much more strongly, take ownership of it and recognise that there are things we can be doing in mental health and wellbeing about people that are more visible, that demonstrate leadership. The work we've done with you to take our team through a process of helping them with the tools they need to think about their mental health and wellbeing, and practical ways for them to own their mental health, wellbeing and resilience in the workplace, has been wonderful for us. So that's been an important initiative for our firm.

Another is diversity and inclusion training. We've been doing a lot of work, we're deeply committed to diversity and inclusion at Cube Group, particularly that inclusivity side of things. When you feel that there is a safe place for you in an organisation and you are included irrespective of your background and your diversity, it reduces the potential for that sort of stress that can really be the kryptonite for wellbeing. We've been very focused on that. Creating a place where everyone feels safe.

Clare Desira: Incredible. I know I've seen that with you and with your leadership team and at all levels of the organisation. The trust that you have with one another, even just from that first point that you mentioned around all roles being flexi, the amount of trust that that has created. I love that you shared that that felt like a leap for you initially as the leader, but that you've seen the benefits from that.

Of course it goes without saying that we've really loved working with your team and the work that we've done together as another demonstration of you truly walking your talk when you say 'let's approach this pandemic and this time through that growth mindset lens'. This is not just about coping and putting those basic supports in place, like an EAP for example, but actually really supporting your team to focus on something and have tools that they can focus on to not only cope through this situation, but to really thrive. To build their confidence and their courage, and the things that they speak up about and the way that they set boundaries to support them to recharge and reset on the fly. But we take our hats off and always point to the culture that you've created there at Cube.



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Ben Schramm: With the pandemic, I find it really interesting the way that it has kind of collapsed these boundaries between personal and professional life. You know, we're in each other's lounge rooms now, we're in each other's bedrooms in some cases if that's where people got their desks set up. So we've transplanted ourselves into people's lives more than we ever had before. I think that that brings with it almost an obligation, it's like a stewardship, for leaders to recognise that.

For example, you might be talking to one of your team and one of their kids comes by for a quick cameo on the Zoom, and they might say "sorry, they're hungry, sorry, I just had some challenges with my young ones so that we have to go to the doctors and just a few medical issues that we're dealing with. But anyway, back to the project." There's two things you can do: go back to the project as they want, or you can say "is everything all right?" I'm certainly advocating that we're all of a sudden leaders or firms are becoming counsellors or psychologists. But I think that there's a space here that we need to step into to recognise that we're almost in this kind of privileged position. It's not just leaders, it's at all levels of organisation and all the different connections we have with our peers and our colleagues to see that we see more, we hear more about the lives of our colleagues and how we can be as supportive as we can be with that line of sight that we now have, and wrap support around each other.

Clare Desira: Yeah, I love that you're holding space for each other, not just on projects or with your clients, but also just for each other as humans. And I love that perspective. Thank you. Now, Ben, you have been doing this work for a couple of decades and it takes a lot of energy to build and grow a business and to work with such incredible for purpose clients. So I'm really curious about how you personally build your mental health and resilience, and what lessons do you draw from there?

Ben Schramm: I guess my mental health and resilience journey has been an interesting one in that when I was 26, I was diagnosed with a heart condition that required open heart surgery, double valve replacement. Which is a pretty big time for a 26 year old person who, at that time, you think you're a bit more invincible and bulletproof. You're thinking nothing can touch me and then that came along in my life. So that was hugely confronting for me and changed my trajectory in the sense that I went through that surgery, and it all went well, but it was a life-changing event and quite traumatic for me. I was anxious, I had a range of health anxieties, as you would before but also after the surgery. And it really changed my outlook on mental health because I experienced that curve myself.

And then after that, whilst I'm fine now, I had a few complications after the surgery. Some of those even happened on some projects I was working on, where I had to go back for tests and there was the possibility of more surgery and I was extremely anxious about it. One project at the time I needed to take some time off at short notice, and the client at the time, their comment to one of my colleagues was "Ben shouldn't have pulled that one on us." Looking back at it now, I think, that really spoke to her character more than mine, but you realise when you're on the receiving end of that lack of empathy how harsh it can be and how people really can't understand what you're going through in terms of some of that lived experience of, trauma and mental health.



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Fortunately for me, I didn't need to have surgery and came out the other end and everything's been fine for me, but the experience shifted my perspective, I think, and it made me not want my team to have that lack of support in their lives and in their careers. So I've always felt a deep empathy towards mental health and wellbeing for our people and wanted that at Cube Group. So we've really embraced the idea of everything we can do to be reinventing ourselves and thinking about how we can help our people.

There's big things that we've done, like the work with yourselves, and we've got a robust EAP in place, the Diversity and Inclusion training that we've done, they're all really important pieces of work we do. The way that we engage our team regularly to hear how they're doing, the way that we've embedded strength-based conversations in our counselling relationships has been a really important investment from us. But some of it also is just the little things. One of our team works from Scotland, and he'll often get a little care pack from the team with some Vegemite and some Tim Tams and some other touches of Australia just to help him feel connected. We had some little packs to Cubies recently that went out that have kids that are homeschooling at the moment, it's been a bit tough, which had colouring in, some games, little dinosaurs that were in water that came out of their eggs, and they loved it. We were all sharing it on Slack and saying how much it was nice to feel connected during a tough time. So sometimes it doesn't have to always be the big things. It can be the little touches that make a difference too.

Clare Desira: Yeah. I love that. And Ben, what about you personally? What do you keep doing to build your own mental health and resilience?

Ben Schramm: I guess a few things Clare. One of the things that's very important to me as a leader and modern leader is authenticity. What I try to do with my team is try to be open about how I'm feeling and not be bulletproof as a leader. When you do that, you bottle things up. And when you bottle things up that degrades your resilience and your mental health. You need to have that release and a way to do that is to speak openly. If I've had a tough day, I'll talk about it. If I'm feeling a bit tired, I'm happy to share that. If I'm worried about a course of action that I've taken, I'll speak openly about that. We need to get past this idea that you're losing face with your team. If you do that, if you've got the right people around you, that will galvanize your relationships with them because we're not robots, we're humans. I think showing that at all levels is important. The more I do that, the more it strengthens my mental health. So that's one thing that I do.

I think I've got better over time at finding the third space in my life. So, you know, the personal, the professional, and that kind of turn off space. Technology is just so pervasive, and the ability to spend time with my kids, walk the dog, go for a run, exercise and build that into my week has been helpful for my mental health. An extension of that is with what we've done at Cube, where we've given real empowerment to our team with their roles. Flexing is to say "Okay, I've got a whole week to play with here, I want to do some work in the evening, one day I get up early, I might be morning person. I might want to take an afternoon off on Friday as I know I'm going to do a bit of work on Sunday night." So a little bit of rethinking the week structure is something that I and many members of the Cube team have done as well, which has been really helpful.



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Something that I learned really from the work with you, Clare, and Top Five has been some of the mental models that can help you to reframe your thinking when the reality is that there'll still be stress, that there'll be points where you just feel overwhelmed and it's all a bit much. The ability to understand that the way that our thoughts drive our feelings, drive our actions, that think, feel, act model that you've shared with us, has been a really valuable tool. Just to practically be able to reframe your thinking and create some more positive thought patterns at times when you most need them has been another great tool for me.

Clare Desira: Thanks, Ben. And I love how you've said around that when you're vulnerable, when you really share how you were feeling humanly with your team, that it actually galvanizes your team, it brings you together and it makes you stronger.

We've explored in our work together a little bit around this idea of helpful, encouraging and productive thinking. So I wonder, Ben, if you were thinking about the most helpful, encouraging messages that you could give your team at the moment, what thoughts would spring to mind?

Ben Schramm: That idea of a safe, authentic space is really important, and a lot of it comes down, again, to that human centered approach to it. So much of this comes down to the conversations you have within your firm with leaders, with each other, and then also with your clients. And each of those conversations is an encounter really. And how do you make sure that your people are equipped to have great conversations that are helping to strengthen their health and wellbeing in the workplace?

One of the things that's important to me with our team is we're really serious about a strength based approach at Cube. We've embedded it in right through the organisation, in terms of our people's skills, experience, their career pathways, the types of work they want to do, and the client experience. We use this term "strong, not wrong", which is a lovely way of encapsulating that there might be some things that you're not so good at, but rather than focus on them let's look at the positives and what you're naturally great at, and really dial up those. The more you can hang out with your strengths and the more that you can focus on them with the HEP thoughts, helpful, encouraging, productive thoughts, strength led lead themselves to that type of thinking. So helping our people to have conversations that bring that growth mindset to their strengths can really short circuit other more negative patterns of thinking and help our people feel safer, happier and willing to open up a bit about those authentic areas that they're feeling worried about.

Clare Desira: Yeah, I love that. Strong, not wrong. Wrong, not strong. Brilliant flip either way. Really terrific. It's a really permission giving statement for people I think. You mentioned earlier that EAP (employee assistance program) on its own isn't enough. What do you think is still holding us back as organisations in addressing mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, and what do you think we can do about it?



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Ben Schramm: It's a great question. I think about it quite a bit. If we asked 50 contemporary and well-regarded leaders in a cross section of industries "What do we mean when we say mental health in the workplace?", we'd get 50 different answers. I think they'd be wildly different actually. One of the reasons for that is mental health can be kind of opaque in some ways. It can be a bit hard to touch and feel. So as a result of that, there are times when we put it in the too hard basket and not really tackle it. That's part of the problem. It's "where do I start here?" instead of eat the elephant thing. So I think that's something to overcome and we need to say that that's okay. It is evolving our understanding of it. And there's an educational element here too, where you need to organisationally be vulnerable, in the same way that we talk about at an individual level, and recognise that we don't have all the answers. As an organisation be a bit porous in the way that you open up those outside boundaries to your organisation to other experts and advisors who can help you learn a bit more about it and embed that thinking into your practice and with your people.

I've learned an enormous amount, I've been in industry for 21, 22 years, and just in the last two years, I think this is a time to step into this space of wellbeing and mental health and resilience. The previous modus operandi has been a little bit of risk management set and forget, get an EAP in place, more transactional, okay the safety net's there, we've got an EAP. There's so much more you can do. Explore, talk to people like yourself, Clare and understand that there are pathways you can take that will really build amazing resilience and a healthy workplace for your people.

The other point is that there are economic realities that I don't think we should shy away from in organisations. There are commercials that need to be considered in the way you make investments in any sort of training of your team or any other initiatives that you undertake. And what I'd say to leaders is, don't worry, they'll look after themselves. What I've experienced is if you don't try and draw too strong a link between the work that you're doing in resilience building and healthy mental health in your workplace and the commercial outcomes, if you like, or the investments that you're making in that, then you experience this freedom and the authenticity of what you're doing will just drip through your organisation. What ultimately happens is you've got a stronger culture, your team feels more empowered, you are more productive and that will flow through to all of the economics. They will look after themselves. So put wellbeing first. Don't try and make too strong a link to the commercials.

Clare Desira: I think that's really important. What's also important to say there, Ben, is that this is, like you've said, you've called it a journey and it's an ongoing process and it's absolutely an investment too.

So it's an investment, right? Investing in things like wellness and resilience training. When I say that, I talk about live experiences for teams, not just a few worksheets in the dusty corners of a shared drive somewhere, but it's actually these live experiences that keep it front and centre.

Just on the idea of investment, and maybe I'm alone in thinking this, but I think what a lot of people miss the understanding of, is that one of the biggest investments that we make any single day is our thoughts and what we choose to focus on. And there's an absolute cost and an opportunity with that as well, because whether it's when we're waking up in the morning or we're brushing our teeth, or we're about to have a tricky conversation with someone or we're heading into a big decision, having the tools to help us reset and choose what we focus on in those moments - so that we can focus on a growth mindset or a practical mindset or a courageous mindset or whatever it is that we need - that is one of the biggest investments that we ever make. So the tools that you've been touching on, they're not tools that you use once and set and forget, they're ones that you keep bringing every single day to every conversation, every decision, every micro decision in any day as well. So I love that you've mentioned that.



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Ben Schramm: I really like the outlook there Clare, because it's about what we describe as valuing your values, and two of our values at Cube are that we work as one and that we're collaborative. That is about recognising that the wellbeing side of it is not always, if you like, the more showy things - we've got a comfy couch with a cool coffee machine, here's this area where you can go and do some yoga during the day. There was a period where some of that was, tokenism is a strong word, but it was a bit too surface level. Not actually embedded in your culture as you're describing Clare, which is about helping us to think differently.

That far deeper penetrates into your organisation and equips your people rather than providing some more surface level tools or areas of an office that you can do things in. I liked that. Something we've really thought hard about is how you evolve your culture in a way that is continuing to recognise the values, the behaviors, the assumptions that need to support ongoing resilience and mental health. Again, that's part of the journey.

Clare Desira: Ben, you've been in this space for a while, whether it's working with for-purpose businesses or community organisations or government departments. When I ask you, as a fellow generous leader, to picture other people in your B Corp communities or for-purpose world, who comes to mind as a generous leader.

Ben Schramm: I see generous leaders as those who show more of their authentic selves. I would say leaders who are generous with their feelings, not generous with their money, not generous with their decisions, not generous with their strategies, their coaching, but generous with their feelings. That's how I picture them.

Clare Desira: Oh, I love that. Thank you so much, Ben, it's been a joy as always to speak with you and learn with you. Thank you so much for your time. I know our listeners are really going to enjoy this chat, so thank you so much.

Ben Schramm: Thanks for having me, Clare.

Post Interview

Clare Desira: Well, there you have it listeners, Ben Schramm from Cube Group. What a refreshing bunch of insights shared with us today. Just want to do a quick summary and share some further thoughts on a few of the key points that Ben made. I think one of the most exciting ones was around that growth mindset approach that Cube took as they headed into the pandemic and headed in particularly to the second year of unknowns.

Some of the skills that any of us are learning right now are some that we'll be able to take forward for years. And so it's a great opportunity for us to reflect on and head into, whether we've still got a month or two months or another year of living in these conditions, to really be sharpened and tuned into the lessons that we're actually going to learn and be able to take forward.



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What I really loved about working with Cube, and from hearing Ben's insights today, is they really made a choice to focus on what was within their control and influence, rather than what was out of their control. When we were initially talking with the Cubies, at Cube Group, when we're working with the people team and Ben and the Exec to shape out what we could do to support them, not only were they looking for support to build team resilience, but they also had some org changes on the horizon at the time. So we designed a behaviour change program that would not only be jam packed with those resilience tools, but one where we'd be able to draw on our coaching experience to support people to set what we at Top Five call mindset goals. Mindset goals that are totally within our own control and things that we can absolutely own and focus on, regardless of what change is happening around us.

So some of the team members set goals like diving into each day with deeper confidence in what I can bring to my work, or stepping into leadership opportunities with a greater sense of calm. Many of you listening, who are no doubt in these generous roles where the work is never ending and it takes a lot of energy, might relate to another really common type of goal that the team set, which is around building healthy and realistic expectations that would support me in life and work.

By doing this as a team, they've not only coped during this time, but in their words, they've thrived. They've become better leaders. They have a greater sense of being one team and they've developed an extraordinary level of support and trust across the organisation as well.

Now don't get me wrong, Ben's leadership at Cube and Cube Group as an organisation have always been a magnet for great people. But because of their growth mindset approach to the whole pandemic, they've actually become stronger as a team over the last 12 months. If you want to learn more about this type of mindset goal that we're talking about here, I share more about this in a bonus episode that was in season one. That episode was called Expert Insight: Myths About Finding Your Purpose and What to Try Instead. So if you want to dive into that one for yourself, I'll share the links in the show notes.

The other thing that I loved about what Ben shared, and I know he has a strong opinion about this which we really love, is that wellbeing is not a set and forget idea. It's up to us as leaders of organisations to not just be looking at what has become a basic level of support in this space. Ben touched on the idea of EAP programs (or employee assistance programs) where an organisation or employer funds counselling or psychologist sessions for their teams. And that, once upon a time, was considered to be gold class.

But I guess what Ben was asking, and what we're asking often as well of our clients and leaders in the industries that we work with, is it enough? At a bare minimum of what we would really love to see, is that all leaders in any organisation that has an EAP program, that they really promote it as a service to access proactively. Not that it's just a service for when team members are really struggling or in crisis, but they actually draw on those services as a way to proactively build their mental health, mindset and resilience as well. It's something we really believe in strongly at Top Five, because it'd be really short-sighted to just think that these types of services, or programs like ours, that are about mindset, resilience, mental health building, as a nice wellness service.



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When done well, these programs are actually far more than a wellness service. They're change mindset, they're communication, they're team building, problem solving, resilience building, trust creating and performance lifting programs that also just happen to have strong wellness outcomes.

So I'll end my rant there! Clearly Ben and I share some views on that subject. I'll leave you thinking at the end of this episode around what can you learn? How can you tweak or tune into that growth mindset approach to the rest of what this year has to bring for you and your teams? What can you be learning? What can you be taking forward and how can you get in the drivers seat with the things that you can absolutely control? And there are always far more of those than we realise on those shaky days.

Thanks so much for listening. A big thanks to Cube. We'll see you soon.

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. I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjri 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 and never miss an episode.

And if you're ready to start building your team's resilience or to help them reset, refuel and recharge head on over to topfivemovement.com and see what we have to offer. Wishing you the strongest mental health, mindset and resilience as you head into the rest of your day. Have a cracking day.

