

## First Nations Disability Network's Damian Griffis on building resilience even when the work will never end | [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 organizations 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.

Hit subscribe now to 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](https://topfivemovement.com) and see what we have to offer. Let's get into it.

Interview

**Clare Desira:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised that the following podcast contains the names of people who have passed.

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. Today our guest is the wonderful Damian Griffis. Damien is a descendant of the Worimi people of the Manning Valley in New South Wales. He's an award winning human rights leader and has been a central figure in the establishment of both the Aboriginal Disability Network of New South Wales, and also the national organisation that represents the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities and their families. That's the First Peoples Disability Network where he leads today as CEO.

Damian, it's wonderful to have you here.

**Damian Griffis:** No worries, great to be here.

**Clare Desira:** Damian, you work in the intersection of both disability and also human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and I'm curious about what has been the impact of the pandemic on your day-to-day leadership?

**Damian Griffis:** Look, it's been a very challenging, I would almost call it two years now, in a lot of ways, not just for me personally, but for my organisation. A lot of us are very personally affected by COVID because we know community members, out there in our communities are really struggling and that's been a real challenge for all of us. As we draw to the end of the year, I know I'm certainly feeling tired and so are my colleagues. It's been a really challenging year for everybody and I think it's important to acknowledge that.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Clare Desira:** Yeah, it sure has. Day-to-day in your leadership, what's been the difference do you think in these last two years, compared with previously?.

**Damian Griffis:** The obvious thing is none of us have lived through a pandemic before, but I think what's been really challenging for my organisation, and I know from talking to people outside of the First Peoples Disability Network, is that connectedness has been very different this year. So we haven't physically been in the office together. My staff and the teams have been working online, often from our homes, and we're a kind of organisation that actually really benefits from people being together and supporting one another very directly. So that's been a really significant challenge.

We've got staff located around the country too, so another challenge throughout the COVID period has been that some of us are in very different situations. Our staff in Queensland may be locked down for a period, and then us in Sydney for another period, or whatever it might be. So it's been a real challenge to sort of juggle that when you're a national organisation, the different status that people are faced with in terms of COVID restrictions and being able to move around.

But the ability to get around and about directly to community has probably been our biggest struggle, because that's something we do all the time and we haven't been able to do that as much as we'd like to in the last couple years.

**Clare Desira:** I bet a part of your work is really fuelled by getting out and connecting with people in community as well. So I'm sure that's been having an impact on you too.

**Damian Griffis:** Definitely Clare that that's another big factor. We're the kind of organisation that if we're sitting behind our desks, we're not doing our job properly. We have to be out and about directly meeting with our community members with disability, and often the people we're spending time with are located outside of the urban centres. So we spend a lot of time in regional, remote Australia. I myself spend a lot of time in Canberra and Melbourne. I think that's been a real struggle for us, because that keeps us connected to what's going on on the ground. So it's been a real shift actually, to move away from being able to work that way.

Having said that though, that's presented some opportunities too that we haven't had before. So it's had some positive elements to it too.

**Clare Desira:** Tell us about some of the opportunities it's presented.

**Damian Griffis:** It's given us a bit more time to sort of slow down, do a bit more reflecting, contemplate a bit more what we're going to do as an organisation as we continue to grow. We've got a little bit less reactive, a bit more about where we're heading as an organisation strategically, because we haven't spent the same amount of time as we normally would out and about.

So there's been some silver lining there.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Clare Desira:** It sounds like you're a bunch of action takers as well. So when you can't take action, instead of just falling flat, you've found other ways to move forward, even if that's meant slowing down.

**Damian Griffis:** I think that's right Clare. You're right, we're very much an action oriented organisation where we're each personally committed to supporting our community members with disability across the country. We've had to do that in a different way now. So we've had to sort of pivot to how can we still support our community members, but in a way where we're not literally able to go out in the community, and we've been doing some good things in that sense.

**Clare Desira:** Thank you for sharing that. If part of the motivation and the fire for your team is actually getting out and about in and connecting with community, with that missing, what have you done to not only support people through the pandemic, but also to support their mindset and resilience and mental health without some of that usual fuel there to get them going?

**Damian Griffis:** I think that's been a real challenge, and one that we've met pretty well I'd have to say. But what we've had to do is check in with one another, in online ways cause that was the only option we had. I think it's important to recognise, and something I was reflecting upon the other day, what's been really unique about the situation we're in, and I'm assuming others that are having the same experiences, no one's really taken any leave. Because there hasn't been any point to take leave, you'd be sitting at home, taking your leave.

I've really noticed everyone's just sort of worked through, and that's meant that the intensity of this whole experience is always in your face. In the past we might take a few weeks off and head bush or whatever, but those opportunities haven't been there. Especially if you're in Sydney and Melbourne and Queensland, you couldn't even travel to take a break.

So, that's been something very different and something I was reflecting on the other day that none of us have really, in terms of staff taking a break, we normally would.

**Clare Desira:** I'm sure many listeners will be able to relate to that. And I know for sure, being in Melbourne and being in lockdown, I can relate to that myself. But what we're seeing from organisations is that people don't want to take leave because, as you've said, they're sitting at home and that just creates a bit more of a space. There's less distractions available to us than there were before and it gives us more time to be taking in what's happening and noticing what's different for us as well.

Lots of people, particularly in a generous leadership space, they work and work and work until they take annual leave and then they take their annual leave to recover. What we really notice in our work, and when you look at the numbers, that annual leave is actually 8% of the year. So there's 92% of the rest of the year where we're working and many of us working flat out until a break. So we're always really interested in learning more and understanding more about the ways that people learn to recharge and reset on the fly in the absence of annual leave. I wonder, have there been things that you've done as a team to help boost each other and reset and recharge on the fly during this time?



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Damian Griffis:** When the pandemic first set in, we would have regular Friday social Zooms, and I've got a couple of amazing staff who are very good at organising those kinds of things. So that was really important, in the early days of the pandemic. They would be get-togethers not to talk about work, but to have a casual Friday afternoon catch up. If you want to have a glass of wine, go for it or a glass of Coke or whatever you wanted it to be. That was something we did in the early days of the pandemic. And I think that was really important, just to lighten the mood, because as you know, Clare, as everyone knows who's lived through this pandemic, it's always there. It's always something being talked about and I think to move away from that for a few hours on a Friday afternoon was really important in the early days. So that was a really good idea and I think that worked really well.

**Clare Desira:** That sounds great and I love how you've given your team permission to not talk about work. I know lots of teams are doing this, especially teams like yours that are largely remote or spread right across Australia. I'm really fascinated in the things that you might have learnt out of these new ways of working that you might take forward as well.

**Damian Griffis:** I think there's some positive elements definitely. I think the opportunity for those who want to, to work from home, is a good thing. Even from my own personal experience, I can imagine a sort of hybrid work model going forward, where you might spend three days in the office and a couple of days at home. I think being able to avoid having to spend time traveling to work every day, Monday to Friday, is a really positive experience for a lot of people.

That can lend itself to a bit more work life balance. I'd be pretty confident that every one of the staff members here wants a work future like that. I think we've also had to adapt really quickly to working online and we all have, so that that's a new skillset in itself, being able to do that.

So there's been some positive elements, definitely. It's good for us because we need to do that going forward anyway, because like you said, we've got staff located all around the country so we can't come together in a physical sense regularly anyway at the best of times. So we've just learned how to adapt to that in a better way I think.

**Clare Desira:** Yeah and connecting new ways right across the country by the sounds of it, too.

**Damian Griffis:** Yeah absolutely



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Clare Desira:** Damien, I'd love to talk about your experience. You've been doing this work for a really long time now, and I can't imagine the energy and resilience that it takes to be continually advocating for human rights in this way. What I'm really interested in, what are some of your non-negotiables when it comes to maintaining and building your own mental health and mindset?

**Damian Griffis:** I'll be really honest with you, Clare, I've had to get a lot better at that to ensure that I have longevity. Because, like you say, the work we do and a lot of other people that work in human services or, or work in a justice sense, one of the real challenges is some of the change you're trying to create, particularly the systemic change you won't necessarily see in your lifetime. And that's kind of an unusual workspace to occupy in some ways. The wheels of the system turn very slowly. The way I approach that personally is I definitely have had great mentors in the past, Aboriginal leaders who were powerful and passionate advocates. Who did it for no money, they didn't even get paid when they did it, they just did it because it was the right thing to do, and I've always admired that. And that's given me perspective.

I also think that as a team we have a lot of comradery, a lot of commitment to the cause and to one another, and I think that is really important. And recognition that the work is hard. I think it's okay to say that, because it is hard. We're dealing with a lot of our Mob who live in extreme poverty and that's very challenging to observe and witness and you have to have an outlet. You have to find a way to let that go. It's always a challenge that, Clare, always.

**Clare Desira:** Over the years, what are some of the ways that you've let that go? What are some of your personal outlets for processing some of that?

**Damian Griffis:** So very personal thing, I have an extra challenge because I'm diagnosed with a generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder and all sorts of things. So I've had to learn to manage my mental health even on a personal capacity, let alone a work capacity. So that's for me meant that there's certain things I just don't do. I don't drink too much coffee and things like that. I'm very much trying to live as healthy as I can, easier said than done.

I like to do things like swimming, because I love the silence of that. I try to meditate when I can, and I love my sports, so I have outlets. I enjoy playing golf when I can with a mate of mine. But they're very difficult things to find time to do. One of the great challenges for all of us in this kind of work, in any work, I guess, is learning how to be present and doing all you can in that moment. Recognising that we're one cog in the big wheel and we can do what we can do. But I'm also very grateful for a great partner, and I have two wonderful daughters and they give me incredible perspective.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

And then community itself gives me incredible perspective. So, the other thing I try and do is to remind myself it's not about me anyway. It's about the cause. So I try and take my ego out of things as much as possible.

**Clare Desira:** Keep that perspective. What a great, reminder for yourself as well. Thanks for sharing that Damien. I wanted to get a sense of, when you say that you try to meditate, what does that look like for you? Because it can look different for many different people.

**Damian Griffis:** I'll probably use it in a really broad sense of the word Clare. So for me, even reading a book is a form of meditation for me. I love reading. So one of the great things that I set up this year was a book club with some mates. Every couple of months we get on the Zoom, because we're from different parts of the country, and we have a book club. I think that's been really great because that's outside of work again. Fortunately I have a few mates who are keen readers too, and I find reading a great escape. I often find going to the movies a great escape, but I haven't been able to do that as much, like any of us have this year.

But then I do literal meditation when I get the opportunity. I wish I made it a more consistent part of my daily practice. I have to say, probably like a lot of us, I tend to do it when it's urgent to do it. Slowing down is a challenge for me and I think it is for a lot of us that work in this field, as you would know, Clare, it is hard to walk away. One of the challenges that I think we all face when we're in justice, human services stuff, you're always concerned that we're never doing enough. The way I try and deal with that is to go, again, it's not about me, it's about the cause. So, that can help sometimes.

**Clare Desira:** I find when we're working with leaders in this space, we really try to support them to reframe the idea of switching off, because switching, being off, isn't motivating or exciting, and that's a weird place to be. So we try and encourage leaders to switch into a recharge mode. So you're not either on or off, you're either on or recharging. In whatever shape or form that takes, whether it's having a swim or having your book club with your mates. Whatever it is that supports you to recharge.

**Damian Griffis:** I really like that Clare. I'm going to steal that.

**Clare Desira:** Go for it!

**Damian Griffis:** Cause I'm that kind of person that doesn't particularly like quietness. I can be quite bored with that idea, so a better way to reframe it is recharging. I like that.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Clare Desira:** Damien, I was really curious to know, at the moment as a leader, what two or three things do you think is helpful and encouraging and productive for people to be remembering right now?

**Damian Griffis:** That there'll be light at the end of the tunnel. You know, we'll get through this. There'll be light at the end of the tunnel. It's really got me thinking, that question, because there's always hope and there's always a brighter future potentially.

I'm really hopeful, but then I'm an idealist. I'm an optimist, like a lot of us are that work in these sort of areas, that will hopefully take the lessons from the pandemic around, particularly not from a first nations perspective, sadly, but in a general sense, the quick mobilisation to me is a really important lesson.

Imagine if we could take those learnings and mobilise quickly to address some of the big challenges facing humanity, such as climate change, or once and for all addressing poverty, and particularly poverty in our first nations communities. I think there's the lessons that we need to take from this global pandemic.

**Clare Desira:** What a great insight.

Damien, one of the things that you said was that the work's never done. So I'm sure you've had to learn over the years how to end the day or the work efforts at some point. What would you say to a young leader or another leader that is in that situation, where they log off at the end of the day and the work is never done. And it may never be done in their lifetime.

What would you say is important for them to remember?

**Damian Griffis:** That's a great question, Clare. One of the things that my mentor Uncle Lester Bostock taught me is that we need to recognise where there's sort of a link in the human chain. So, one of the things to settle upon in a way.

An important thing to conceptualise is that some of the change that we're seeking, we won't necessarily see in our lifetime. That doesn't mean we're not doing the work. That doesn't mean that at all, but that the struggle will be ongoing. Hopefully it will end at one point, at some point.

But Uncle Lester in his life saw enormous progress for first nations people, and I know that when he passed, he was anxious to still see more. But in a way it's then passed on and you make the next set of progress and then it's passed on to someone else to make further progress. In an ideal world you'd make the progress rapidly and we'd all be happy and everything would be fine, but I think it's helpful sometimes to get that perspective. But it's not said in a negative sense if you get my drift, it's not about resigning to the fact that therefore we won't necessarily see the change we're looking for, but it's about passing on the baton, and legacy.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

it's not meant to sound defeating. It's more around that we're a link in the human chain. It's very much a first nations perspective too, being aware of your place in the world and that there'll be others that come after you and that the thing to leave is the strength and the resilience so that more change can happen. You know, it'd be wonderful to see the change happen in my lifetime that I want to see. I mean we want to see an indigenous voice to parliament. I want to see Makarrata Commission. Will it happen in my lifetime? I think it will. I'm 50 in a few weeks. I think it will, but then beyond that there'll need to be further change. It'll be about making that work effectively, and that may be for the next generation to carry on.

**Clare Desira:** Thank you for explaining that and thank you for making that connection for us around that first nations perspective as well. I think that the more of that perspective that we can learn about and understand is just so incredibly important. So thank you so much.

Damien, thank you so much for your time today. You've shared so many insights and I'm really, really grateful for your time. I know there are many, many hats that you wear in many places you could be right now. So thank you so much for your time.

**Damian Griffis:** Good on you Clare, I really enjoyed it. Cheers.

## ***Post Interview***

**Clare Desira:** Well there you have it, Damien Griffis, what an incredible human, let alone leader. I'm so grateful for the time with Damien. There's so many things that I could expand on, but a couple of places I want to remind you on what Damien spoke about today were around mentors. The second thing is around the work's never done and how we can acknowledge and validate that and also process it. And the last is where you can find some more on this idea of recharging rather than switching off.

So on that first point around mentors, Damien shared that they've been really important for him as a way to build his own mindset, mental health, and resilience.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

It sounded like Damien's mentors have been really incredible for that sense of perspective, to keep his ego in check, to be able to keep him out of the weeds, keep him going and bring that strength and resilience. And so I wonder when was the last time you chatted with a mentor, or reached out to a mentor, or had a conversation with someone that you know can really support you to step back and keep that bigger perspective and to be able to recognise perhaps progress or strength or confidence you're developing. Or lessons that you're learning, even in some of those really hard and unsexy ways.

The second thing I wanted to touch on was Damien's comment around how the work is never done and that it's really important. One of the things that he's really drawn on is actually taking the time to recognise that the work is hard and it may never feel like the work is done. When it comes to actually recognising and acknowledging that work is hard, there's something here around actually being able to process the emotions that go along with that, and something that can really support us to process emotions is to slow down long enough to notice what they are. To name them, to be able to validate them. This is something that we see can be really powerful for both individuals through our work, but also for teams as well. To be able to say to somebody or say to ourselves, which is equally as powerful, it makes sense that you're feeling really frustrated about this, or it makes sense that you're feeling really sad.

To even be able to name that emotion is often a really great first step in being able to process it. Damien went on to share some of his personal outlets that he draws on to help process some of those emotions, and maybe complete some of those stress cycles when we've been experiencing some real strong emotions. For him it was around swimming and the silence that swimming presents, or eating well to be able to fuel himself in a way that doesn't cause too many, you know, peaks and troughs as he navigates. Managing that anxiety, let alone just day to day life. Another was around the book club. I mean, what a great idea to be able to connect with people in a way that isn't about work, you know, to be able to lose yourself in another topic and then know that there's some time to chat about that.

Our outlets for processing emotions are all really different and there are many different ways that that looks. The great reminder that Damien's given us today is the power of actually having some of those and even knowing what some of them are. One of the resources that we've shared before in the podcast, and we're so happy to share again, to support with that is our mindset recharge menu, which really supports generous leaders and people that are doing work that never feels like it's done to do what we talked about today. To actually have a menu of things that can support them to recharge. Not to switch off and find yourself on the couch with the remote aimlessly but fidgety and not really being able to relax, but what are the things that individually work for you that allow you to switch to recharge mode, instead of off mode, so that you can actually re-energise and get back to that work that may never be done, but at least you're turning back up in a different mindset in a different state.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

---

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

There's also something I'll drop in the show notes as well that's an article that I wrote and we've shared in different places like on Pro Bono Australia and through our own channels, around the idea of switching from on to recharge rather than on to off.

So in summary today, have a think about who your mentors are and if it's time to reconnect or create a new relationship. Perhaps have a think about how and where it might be powerful for you to validate where your work is hard, or support others to do that as well. The third thing might be around actually learning a bit more about the mindset recharge menu idea or switching from on to recharge rather than on to off. If that's something you'd like to explore, then please reach out to my team at [hello@topfivemovement.com](mailto:hello@topfivemovement.com). Then we'd gladly share that resource with you.

The last thing I wanted to end on today was that incredibly hopeful insight that Damien shared with us. And that is of course, if the world's been able to mobilise as quickly as it has around the pandemic, imagine if we could apply those lessons so that we can quickly mobilise around other issues that are facing humanity at the moment. Climate change or poverty, and particularly as Damian advocates for that poverty in first nations community. What a hopeful and incredible question to be asking and be thinking about, in the way that each of us lead and live our lives.

Thank you so much for listening. We've loved having you here.

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](http://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.

