

## Ambulance Victoria's Michelle Murphy on resilience lessons from the frontline | [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.

**Clare Desira:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. We'll be chatting with Michelle Murphy from Ambulance Victoria. Ambulance Victoria support almost 6 million people across Victoria, and Michelle has been in the organisation for nearly three decades. She's been a paramedic right on the frontline and has held several leadership opportunities behind the scenes.

Today I really want to dive into and learn more about how we can recognise and celebrate, and of course learn from these super-humans that just keep going in these times when we most desperately need them. So have your pens ready - there are going to be lots of tips from this wonderful woman.

Michelle, thank you so much for being with us. How are you?

**Michelle Murphy:** Thanks, Claire. I'm really good today, thank you.

**Clare Desira:** Oh, good. I'm sure we've all had up and down days. It almost feels like a relief to sometimes be able to say today's a good day.

**Michelle Murphy:** Absolutely, and I think, as a leader and as a human being, it's important to recognise that we can't always be on and we can't always be having a great day and that it's about managing those ups and downs and swings and roundabouts.



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**Clare Desira:** And I'm sure there have been more ups and downs and swings and roundabouts for your team, particularly at the moment. I was reading that you support almost 6 million people right across Victoria. We've all seen images of the ambulances backed up and I'm sure your days were already pretty full, but how are things really different for you and for your paramedics as well?

**Michelle Murphy:** We are in some unprecedented times and, reflecting on a conversation the other day, we've never experienced anything like this in the history of the ambulance. We prepare and plan for scenarios, we do what we call exercises, test our emergency response plans and we sit around the table and have conversations about what if we lost half of our fleet or what if we lost half of our personnel or what if we had double the number of calls coming in. We have all of these ideas on how we would plan for and mitigate it and all of a sudden we're finding ourselves in exactly that situation. It's scary and anxiety provoking on one hand, and then on the other hand, which is pretty typical for emergency responders, we feel planned and we've got a plan and a process and we're enacting those kinds of things that we've prepared for and planned for.

So it is a bit of a juxtapose for you. I listened to Dan Andrews the other day talking about opening up and, there's nothing more that our teams want than to see their friends and their families, but the reality for us in the healthcare system and for ambulance is that our workload will increase and we saw that last time when we came out of lockdown - that the workload and the community needs us now more than ever - and that means our work volume goes up and it becomes busier.

**Clare Desira:** And of all of the times to get busier, it's like you're stretching again and then again and again. I'd imagine that takes a huge amount of resilience and mindset and the strong mental health to be able to operate in those types of environments. And so what does Ambulance Vic do to support your teams?

**Michelle Murphy:** Oh, it's a great question. It's something that I think is really important as we think about - and I love to have this saying - we should work to live, not live, to work. Sometimes in these kind of environments, it does feel like work is overwhelming and all consuming. And I feel really lucky in Ambulance.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

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Our CEO, Tony Walker, has a really strong message about mental health and resilience and has worked tirelessly to make sure that we've got the right supports. We've got all of these different levels of check-in for our people, and we have about six and a half thousand staff across the organisation, of which about 80% would be operational staff. We recognise that our people come from all walks of life, in all parts of our community. And so to be able to provide varying services, more of what we would call a multi-pronged approach, is really important. That might be a peer support program, which our operational staff and colleagues are able to chat post a job or debrief or talk about something that might be going on to chaplain services and to our psychologists.

We have the Victorian Ambulance crisis counselling unit, a service where our members can, up to 12 times a year, book in and see a psychologist. It's all confidential, it's all free for our staff. That provides this reassurance that when you feel that you need some further support that maybe it's not appropriate or you can't get that from a colleague, or you want some expertise around what's going on for you, you have the ability to be able to tap in confidentially to speak to someone who's got the expertise, is really important. We've doubled the number of psychologists available over the last 18 months. That's been a really important part of providing that support and that confidentiality to our staff, to make sure that they've got ability and access to tap in at any of those different levels of support that they might require.

What I love about the conversation that we're having is that the conversation about our mental health and about our own wellbeing, is such a normal conversation now. I look back, I've been in the organisation 27 years now, and when I started we would never have had those kinds of conversations.

To have a leader, to have someone like our CEO Tony Walker, who is passionate and talks about his own mental health and his own journey, and to be able to go actually today, I'm feeling a bit flat, or I went to a job or a case and it triggered or reminded me of my grandparents or reminded me of something and I want to sit down and have a chat to someone about it. That it's just a normal part of how you go about your day and work-life balance, I think is so important. It's such a refreshing space to think that all of our new staff - and we're recruiting like there's no tomorrow at the moment! - all of our new staff have to check in in their first 12 months. It's part of the curriculum and they need to make sure that they've got their mental health and wellbeing in the forefront of their minds, so that we can make sure during that journey that we keep people well, and we keep people safe, so they can be the best version of themselves, both at work and at home. And I think that that's really important.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

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**Clare Desira:** That's terrific. I love how you said it's so normalised. It's almost like we're expecting people to be human, and so we're supporting them as humans as well. As a leader who has worked in Ambulance Vic for nearly three decades now, you've had experiences both on the frontline and now in leadership roles more behind the scenes, to stick with this career and keep doing such meaningful work for so long, you've no doubt got your own toolkit of resources and tips that you draw on when you need to manage your own mindset and resilience. I'd really love to dive into what some of those are. Let's start with, what are some of the tools that you've brought from your frontline days, those days that are really reactive, where you're dealing with the things that are right in front of you. Let's talk about that first.

**Michelle Murphy:** That's a great question. I think as someone who's evolved as a leader over time, we can get really caught up in that reactionary and responsive space. I think one of the greatest skills that I've learned over time is to shift that mindset from being reactionary to being proactive and strategic and to almost slow down a little bit.

I know that you've got this fabulous saying that I absolutely love, and it's that idea of slowing down to go faster. When I think about that in our emergency services space, for me it's about, just because something is urgent or something is an emergency, it doesn't make everything urgent and an emergency. So for me, it's about really thinking about the pace in which we approach work and the pace in which we approach how we look after and lead our teams. And the expectations that we have on our teams as well I think is really important. So for me, on a personal level, it's about making sure that I take time out to slow down.

It's about feeling really connected to my friends and my family and also connected to myself. So I'm a passionate believer in meditation and yoga and that's something that has really helped reframe or refocus me in those times where I feel like things are getting really busy, and things are almost... not spiralling, but when you feel that overwhelm, like there's so much that needs to be done. It's about using those kinds of techniques and tools to reset a little bit and to reprioritise. Being able to do that for yourself first is really important, because then you can do that for your team. You can give your team permission to slow down, to reprioritise and refocus, and check in with the things that they need to do to fill their own buckets and to feel a bit more grounded.

**Clare Desira:** In today's day and age, so many of us feel like we're operating in these really adrenaline fuelled environments. So whether we're in an office or whether we're actually out on the front line, like many of your teams are, with 24/7 communication and caffeinated up to the max. I think a lot of people can really feel like they're just in that overreaction mode. As someone who's a bit of a pro in this space and has been supporting people operating in this space for a really long time, what else do you think it's really important for us to remember to keep things in check and in perspective, and to be able to stay focused on what we realistically can do at any one time as a human.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

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**Michelle Murphy:** I think it's different for everybody, but the thing that really comes to mind is to absolutely recognise that we're all humans and to be okay with that. To think about mental health and our wellbeing on a continuum.

There'll be days where you feel really, really busy and really overwhelmed, and to recognise days when that feels uncomfortable or when you think, hang on, this is getting really busy. When you recognise that in yourself, then to have those check-in points, those things that you do to help reconnect. It might be as simple as going for a walk or doing some stretching, have a bath, or for me, I like to get into the veggie garden for half an hour. But it's about actually changing your physical state so that you can reset and take that step back in order to ground yourself. I think that that's really important. Different people will have different check-ins, it might be that you want to phone a friend, but it's just about stopping in the moment when you get overwhelmed or when it feels really busy to re-check in and re-prioritise.

I think we can get caught in the moment and particularly if we're the kind of people that like to be busy and like to do things. To stop doing stuff and really ask yourself, do I need to be doing this right now? Can I delegate this? Can I put a pause on this? What do I need to do to reset my own mindset?

What I've really noticed is that you often come back when you take that pause. In the moment you feel like you have to keep going, you've got this endless to do list and you've just got to get through it, and when you get through it you'll feel better. But in actual fact whenever you get to the bottom of it you usually add more things on, so it's almost never ending. I think it's important to take a stop and actually step out. That actually has you come back much more purposeful, much more focused, much more engaged with a bit more of a re-prioritisation.

**Clare Desira:** I think that makes a lot of sense, because people in these roles and a lot of the generous leaders and teams that we work with, their people are natural action takers. They're in these roles to make a difference and to be taking action. And so it can feel really uncomfortable when we stop and we're not taking action. Especially when we're only practicing it for the first time. As you've said, that chance to kind of reset, or as we say at Top Five, slow down to go faster, it can feel really uncomfortable if we're not used to doing that. But there almost needs to be a little bit of trust in the idea that it will support us to come back or slow down so we can go faster. So whether they're circuit breakers like 30 seconds breathing, or whether it's something like you suggested, getting out in the garden and re-grounding that way. We say it's about recharging. It's not about switching off, because the idea of switching off for a lot of people in these roles is just not accessible when there's more work to be done. It is about switching to recharge mode, and knowing which methods, or circuit breakers as we call them, are going to work for you.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

**Michelle Murphy:** I think that's so important, Clare. It might be an emergency services personality trait a little bit, but we often feel like we need to keep going, and I know personally I felt like it's really important and it's valuable and therefore I can't say no. So it's important to be able to say no. To be able to think what can I contribute to, and not taking on too much. Actually prioritising your own families, your own wellbeing and your own downtime. That's super important and that's a learned skill.

When we respond to the community, so often we get into that habit of responding and just going and doing what we need to do. So I think switching that mindset to prioritise yourself and to prioritise the other things that are going on is really important.

**Clare Desira:** I love that you've explained it's a learned skill, because innately and naturally people that are in these roles are going to want to keep going. The more people that can hear someone that has your level of experience in this space say that this is a learned skill, and like any skill that needs practice, is such a powerful message, especially for times like now. Maybe that's one thing, one lesson that people can take away from these times, is that chance to really sharpen up and practice that ability to recharge, so that then you can actually go harder and stronger and have a bigger impact.

**Michelle Murphy:** Absolutely. And we will muck it up. Practice is such an important thing. These are not things that you do once and then you're perfect at them. We're human beings. There are still days when I get so busy and involved in things that I realise it's a few hours later and I haven't actually sat up or had a drink of water or taken a breath. But it's about practicing, to make sure that we keep investing in ourselves and keep taking that time out. It's a lifelong practice, a bit like yoga - no one's ever perfect at it, but it's about practicing your own space, your own skills and listening to your own body. That alignment that I draw between some of the yoga practice and meditation and what I do at work.

**Clare Desira:** Thank you so much for sharing that. Michelle, not only do you create opportunities to support and create space for your team there at Ambulance Victoria, but I know that you do this beyond the organisation, too. You and I have done some work together with women in leadership in emergency services and you do work well beyond that too, on the global stage. Tell me about a little bit about the work that you do globally to keep creating these spaces for women. And what's important to remember when it comes to leadership in the spaces you create?



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

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**Michelle Murphy:** The really important part is about creating spaces to have a conversation about leadership and being okay to lead differently. Emergency services are very traditional organisations, be that in Australia or around the world. People in our communities have bigger expectations of us as leaders to be humble, to be kind, to be flexible, and to think about our employees and the people that we lead as human beings. EMS 2022 will be in Glasgow next year, which was a couple of years delayed because of COVID, but it's an opportunity to bring people together from around the world and to keep those conversations going, around how we support people to lead differently.

I talk about superpowers and I talk about the things that people bring to the table. We all have different superpowers and we all have different things that make us who we are. And we need more variety in that as leaders, because that allows our people to see leadership differently and to resonate for the people that they bring together. Particularly for women, there haven't been a lot of female strong female leaders in our emergency services. Some of that will be historical and over time, but some of that will be traditionally we've had a very command and control style of leadership, and that's not necessarily a strong trait for many women, who might like to lead differently. So these conversations are about being okay to lead differently because we need it and our people need it and our organisations need it. In fact, the world needs us to be able to lead differently.

**Clare Desira:** Beautiful. Gosh, what an amazing room to be in, in Scotland in 2022. I wish you all the very best with that. And of course, a big thank you for the work that you do always as well. Thank you so much, Michelle, for your time. Loved chatting with you today.

**Michelle Murphy:** Thanks Clare. It's been fabulous to have a great conversation with you today.



## ***Post Interview***

**Clare Desira:** Well, there you have it. Michelle Murphy, what a generous leader. I met Michelle earlier this year when I was chairing a Women in Leadership summit for those in emergency services. There were leaders there from police and defence and fire services and our wonderful ambulance services and immediately I was drawn to Michelle. She's so calm and wise, and I just thought I need to learn some more.

One of the things that Michelle shared at that event was that line that she shared today, around when one thing is urgent, it's really important that we don't make everything urgent. Or when one decision is urgent, let's not make them all feel like that. This is a great example of what we would call at Top Five, a HEP thought - helpful, encouraging, and productive thought to practice, and our brain reaches for the thoughts that we've practiced. So what an incredible thought to practice, especially for people that are transitioning from that frontline reactionary type of environment into a leadership role. But I'd actually argue that today, regardless of the role that we're in, so many people are feeling a lot of adrenaline all the time. Whether it's adrenaline from our inbox feeling like it's out of control, or the fact that we can be contacted 24/7, and we're so stimulated, whether it be by our phone or caffeine. I think that's just a really important line for all of us to remember, to be able to keep that calm and keep that focus on the reality and to keep our state in check.

Another thing Michelle touched on was the idea that we can't rely on our to-do list, or the end of our to-do list, as a natural marker and opportunity to switch off or take a rest. Michelle and the other generous leaders that we work with, whether they be in community, business, or government organisations, they're action takers. They go into this work to have an impact. Thinking that either rest or success live at the end of our to-do list is a really outdated way to work. In fact, we've got a little tool that can help with this called our To Feel list. The idea is to be really aware of your state as you head into the day, and as you're leading through the day, rather than just being aware of crossing things off your to-do list. So we flipped that idea of a to-do list into a To Feel list. It's very much still around getting things done, but it's also getting things done alongside taking responsibility and exploring the opportunity that we have to lead with a different state throughout the day, which can make a huge difference.

Another thing Michelle talked about was rest and changing that state of mind. And we call these at Top Five circuit breakers and they can help us reset in the moment or on the job. They're things that we can do that can support us to be in a state that supports our mindset and leadership.

These maybe take as little as a minute through to maybe something along that like taking time off work or taking a holiday. Michelle and I were talking off air about how, even for the super-human paramedics, small circuit breakers like standing up and having a stretch or rolling your shoulders or doing some breathing work just to reset your nervous system can be incredible ways to reset and recharge or circuit break.



# LEADING GENEROUS TEAMS

HOSTED BY CLARE DESIRA

Some of the other circuit breakers that Michelle talked about were things like yoga and meditation or getting out in the garden. I know she loves to get to the beach as well. Those can be terrific when you've got the time to do them, but it's really important also as leaders that we don't lose sight of some of those small circuit breakers that give us that opportunity to reset, recharge and refuel throughout the day.

In fact, we've got a mindset recharge menu that we would be happy to share. So if you're interested in either the To Feel list or the mindset recharging menu, please drop us an email at [hello@topfivemovement.com](mailto:hello@topfivemovement.com). We will be happy to share those documents with you and you can experiment with them as well.

The final thing I wanted to touch on was that new environments and new situations are calling us to lead differently. We've not lived through this experience before, we've all found ourselves in situations that are new and we don't always have a model on how to lead in these situations.

So how do we keep encouraging ourselves and reminding ourselves that we can choose to redefine how are we going to lead at any point in time? Some people will be able to access new insights like this at events like the one that Michelle spoke of, EMS, which is the European Emergency Medical Services Congress, where they'll be supporting people to think about leadership differently in the role of kindness and empathy and our own strengths within this.

There's such a need for this at the moment. In fact, it's been something we've been supporting many leaders with. How do they ground on in and feel confident with the strengths that they have, to be able to lead with more ease, not less effort, but with more ease, and more grace and confidence, joy and focus.

So if that's something that you want to explore a little bit further, or support your team to explore within themselves, around how they can rest and recharge, refocus and recommit, on how they want to show up at any point during the rest of this uncertainty that's likely to roll out as we move in to the next stages of the pandemic, then please reach out and let's have a chat about what that could look like.

So in summary, when one decision is urgent, don't make all decisions urgent. If you're interested in the To Feel list resource to help you redefine your to-do list, what success means and when you rest, check that out.

If you're interested in our recharge menu as well, please drop us a line and we can send you a copy. And the last thing is, don't forget to support yourself and remind yourself that there are tools you can use to reset, recharge and redefine the way that you lead through the rest of the uncertainty that this year and next year might bring for us.

That's all for today. A huge thanks to Michelle. And of course, a big hats off to the Ambulance Victoria team.



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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](https://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.

