



## YS UP GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS PODCAST

### Episode 12 – Managing people risk, return to work, franchises & culture with Damian Tarry

#### Transcript

**Intro:**

Welcome to YS Up Governance and Boards podcast brought to you by 3YS Owls Governance Consultants. Covering hot topics in governance, risk, latest regulatory changes and issues keeping directors and executives awake at night. Here are your hosts Ainslie Cunningham and Deb Anderson.

**Deb:**

Welcome to today's episode of YS Up. Today we are joined by Damian Tarry. Damian is an HR professional here on the Gold Coast enjoying a diverse career, where he has worked within a range of industries including hospitality and tourism, childcare, financial services and retail. The experiences obtained through this time have provided strong learning opportunities, including public listings, mergers and acquisitions, cultural transformation, rapid growth, and operational turnarounds.

**Deb:**

A number of the early roles included remote area living, which have added the depth of knowledge, and people leadership required, for being a strong HR practitioner, given the exposure to wide ranging issues where resourcefulness, was a must. Damian's current role as chief HR officer for Retail Food Group, supporting iconic food brands such as Gloria Jean's, Brumby's, Doughnut King, Crust Pizza, Michel's and DiBella Coffee both in Australia and overseas.

**Deb:**

Damian is a strong advocate for people, and brings organisational focus to engagement and capability, where real impacts can be made no matter what the challenge, or life cycle is. From New South Wales originally, we won't hold that against you Damian, Damian lives on the Gold Coast with his wife Monica, kids Arlo and Brooke, dog Boston and chickens, his bias is, who don't need to be named for this segment, but Damian name your seven chickens.

**Damian:**

They're really shy. They don't like the publicity at all.

**Deb:**

Welcome.

**Damian:**

Thanks Deb. Thanks Ainslie, it's nice to be here.

**Deb:**

So, tell us a bit about Damian Tarry, and living in an Outback Australia.

**Damian:**

Yeah, sure. So, I shouldn't mention New South Wales. Don't talk about that too much here I don't think.

**Ainslie:**

I'm from New South Wales, so I will not hold that against you, by any means.

**Damian:**

I feel like we've got you out numbered. I grew up in New South Wales, in a little town called Woolgoolga. So, for those that don't know, it's about 20 kilometres North of Coffs Harbour, beautiful little seaside town. Leaving school, I went to university to study radiography, which I quickly worked out wasn't for me. So, I left that university, and worked for the rest of the year, and then studied business, ended up majoring in HR. So, from there wanted to get experience, mainly in hospitality and tourism. So, worked in a number of different places, before finding myself out at, Uluru. Ayers Rock Resort, which was incredible. I thought maybe I can last 12 months in a remote area, five years later left, married. So, a lot of change during that period.

**Damian:**

Ayers Rock was probably one of, the best grounding places that I could have had in terms of my career, and probably good for me to grow up as well. So, in that time that I was out there, I signed up to be part of a Critical Incident, Stress Management team. And what we did was we dealt with fairly tough situations, which were, deaths in the area. So, it was a community group, volunteer basis learned, from the RFDS, which were an incredible organisation for remote areas. And, given the turnover, I went from being a trainee to looking after the team at one point. So, really, helped you to grow up quickly and learn a lot.

**Damian:**

So, we would deal with whether they were, incidents that involved deaths on Uluru, single vehicle rollovers, etc. And so, our role was really to debrief people that were witnesses to the event, or family, or Rangers in some cases. So that was a very, enriching experience, very tough and confronting. But it certainly helped mould me and give me a bit more maturity that I desperately needed. So, from there I ended up, working back in Brisbane, with a company called Collection House. It was a big re-engineering of a business there. And then, an opportunity came up to go to another remote area that I said I'd never do, and that was Hayman Island in the Whitsundays. Another really enriching, workplace.

**Damian:**

So, lots of different experience, I settled on the Gold Coast in 2005 with the Mantra Group. And then, started in a business, which was a start-up. That was, early learning services, which is now G8 education. So that was a Greenfields business, starting HR from scratch, which was again really interesting and different. And then from there, ended up with Centrepoint Alliance, which was financial services. This is where that different experience comes into it. And more recently with Retail Food Group, I've been there for almost six years. So, it's a lot of different companies, different

life cycles, even within Retail Food Group, it's been a lot of, change and different challenges, and lots of reward. So, the business has really, gone through an evolution through that period.

**Deb:**

Coffee, donuts, and pizza, all the food groups covered.

**Damian:**

Coffee and carbs. That's what we're known for. And the thing is too that, in a world that's going through all different food trends, it really knows who it is in terms of its past. So, I'll give you an example with Donut King. It doesn't try and compete with mealtimes, it just doesn't try and be a healthy option, it is one that's indulgent that, brings people together and they have joy when they, have their donuts. I'm promoting it at the moment, but don't mean to. But everyone loves donuts, and their milkshakes are the best milkshakes that you can get. So, that's an example I guess, of who we are and what we've always been. We do evolve, and we do change, and we listen to our customers, so that's probably the key for us in terms of the different brands. But it's a tough market as well. So, food franchise in Australia, I don't think there's much tougher.

**Ainslie:**

Let alone adding the challenge of a pandemic in the mix as well. How are some of those franchises fairing through this sort of, current climate?

**Damian:**

Yeah, really good question, Ainslie. Some of them are not, it's been too much for some businesses. And as a franchisor, all we can do is support. It's their business at the end of the day, so we try and support them however we can, and that'll be through financial, mental health, coaching to try and get the most out of their business, help them with local area marketing and so forth. We do have a range of businesses and they are faring, very differently. Depends on the brand, the location, the state, whether they're in a shopping centre and so forth. So, I've got a lot of different formats. And obviously we've got businesses overseas as well. So, in the US we've had real struggle there, as you can imagine. And in Australia where, if I give you an example with the brands, you've got Brumby's, which is very much bread based, has done well throughout that whole period.

**Damian:**

Whereas others haven't because they haven't been able to get access, and haven't been able to have people sit down, in their stores. So, that's been really hard for us. I think the key's been how we support them, from a communication and advice point of view, how we coach them, and nurture and look after them. And similarly, we've got other businesses as well. We do the coffee roasting so, we currently have the capacity to roast about 15 million kilos of coffee per annum, which is a fair bit. And so, through that, if we were to be affected by COVID-19, and you lose someone in that roasting plant, then you're in a lot of trouble.

**Damian:**

So, for us, it's all about being very cautious, and mindful of the situation and the environment, and trying to have the restrictions in place that we can. Similarly, we've got a dairy business in Melbourne. It's cheese packaging and production, and it's the same sort of thing, because it's a plant facility. The important part, there is obviously prevention being better than the cure. So, try and make sure that we've got everything in place, and that we communicate it a lot so that our employees understand what those risks are, how to minimise those, but then what's our backup. So, if someone does get affected by COVID-19, how do we continue to operate? So, really different environments for us.

**Ainslie:**

And so have you found any, of the franchises wanting to change strategic direction in terms of potentially offering, home delivery, or Uber, or any of those sorts of things where they might partner up with somebody to, still have a route to market?

**Damian:**

Yeah, definitely. We're doing that all the time, and again, we have to put measures in place to make sure that deliveries are safe. So, we'll have designated areas in the store that someone can come in, pick up the items, and take them with them. So, it's a real combination in terms of, how we can, you used the word before pirouette rather than pivot, to make sure that we are onto it, and adapting well, and not just sitting in one space thinking it's going to work for us. So, for us, it's a combination of different things. How do we have more of an online presence? How do we promote that, and how do we be very community based? Because as much as we're a franchisor, or as I said before, it's the franchisee's business, it's their own business and how do we make sure they're successful? So, they have to do a lot of work, and all we can do is try and guide them, support them, share information that we know might be working for other franchisees. And then share where they're getting good results.

**Deb:**

So, what's your journey been, when COVID hit from an HR perspective, how did you facilitate the whole work from home scenario?

**Damian:**

That's a great question. And it's probably a very complex process, but I'll try and summarise. So, I think, like everyone, when there was the news of COVID-19 to begin with, it was a little bit, Okay, so how bad is this, what's it going to do? What's the effect on us? And then you really start digging into it and realising, "Okay, we need to act quickly. We need to get ahead of it, and make sure that we act in a precautionary measure, and not have it catch us, and then us having to respond to it as such." So, straightaway in terms of our corporate environment, we really encouraged everyone to work from home unless anyone had to be in the office and set up that flexibility around that. The key for us then was communication.

**Damian:**

Not through media, but through, Worksafe and the government websites, around the advice that they were providing and making sure that we're adhering to the limitations and restrictions. That worked really well for us. But the key was communication. So, we had to make sure that we continually communicated. Now with our business as well we were eligible for JobKeeper, because we did have a downturn in revenues. We also had a lot of employees that had to, go on restricted hours. A number of those employees were down to zero hours, which was pretty tough. So, it was a really hard environment for us, and those that were working had this feeling of survivor guilt, while those that weren't were worried about what was happening in the future, and how long for, and we couldn't predict that because this was such an unprecedented situation.

**Damian:**

So, our mission was obviously performance. Performance of our stores and, business overall. Managing with the team that we had, and trying to consolidate everything that we operated on, so that it was really concerted effort, to bring us up to where we needed to be, and then return people to work as soon as we could, even on limited hours. So, we didn't want people sitting at home on zero hours missing out. And I think this was the really interesting and challenging part from an HR point of view. So, we worked on, I've got a little copy of something here, but we worked on, I guess, a support

tool for our managers, and this was very much driven from our HR team. I've got an amazing HR team.

**Damian:**

We're only small, but, they're a really incredible team. Strong empathy, we're all a bunch of introverts generally, which is unusual in HR, usually have one or two extroverts. But, it works for us, and I think that EQ that was applied from our team and support and talking with each other, and with our managers and with our employees were able to work on things that were really beneficial.

**Damian:**

Part of that was, how do we put in our hands a tool for our managers, to help them with employees returning to the workplace once it was okay to do so. We had a handful of people that stayed in the corporate office pretty much the whole time. And then it was a matter of introducing people, gently, slowly. Making sure that we set up, with good signage and clarity around social distancing and so forth. Always learning, always trying to change it, always trying to update it, and make sure that, you don't put communication everywhere because the more there is you tend to lose the focus.

**Damian:**

So, it's streamlining it, keeping it current, and then do a change out of communication every, couple of weeks, so that there was something new to look at, but not inundating people. The one thing I was worried about was people's mental health, probably more than anything else. I've had some very good experience with that, I've got a challenging situation, personally, I might delve into that a little bit after this. But for us, it was worrying about our employees and how they were going to fair, both being away from work, and then coming back into work. So those that were away from work, we're encouraging people to talk to them. Just have that continual contact, didn't have to be every day. But make sure you can involve them in things and have a conversation with them, ask them how they're doing, and something as simple as that question can provoke a whole conversation, which is where the benefit is.

**Damian:**

So, in bringing people back into work, I was, I guess, preparing for that mental health concern. And it wasn't around the virus as such it was more around, anxiety to do with work, which is so big at the moment. And I think will continue to be a really big issue. So, this was around identifying where, you would have some stresses coming back in. Having conversations, so the manager is practically talking to the employee, making sure that they were comfortable. So, we developed a training tool, sorry, I'm just flicking through to that now and it was, re-entering works atmosphere is likely to be different. So, talking about that whole experience and what it would mean for different people, some people would be so excited, and we talked about the fact that the pros of returning to work, would be the social contact and so forth. The disadvantages might be that you have to get out of your pyjamas.

**Damian:**

So, we tried to keep it as, as light as we could, so that again, reduce the anxiety and any stress around that. But just providing that tool for a conversation was really helpful. We asked employees to talk about their own profile. So, "What was your experience like, what are you expecting to come back into in the workplace? What are you going to miss the most?"

**Deb:**

Homeschooling, they all said homeschooling, didn't they.

**Damian:**

Yes.

**Ainslie:**

What about, have you got a tool for anxiety in pets? Now that they're going to be left at home on their own.

**Damian:**

I know, all the separation anxiety. Our dog's never been fitter or happier for us to leave the house. He's 13 and, he got walked a lot. So, he misses us, but I think he's enjoying the rest at the moment. A big part of that was this, and interestingly, we were doing that before a lot of the media was promoting this sort of concern as well. We had an employee come back in first day, had been on zero hours. So straight back into work, and coming in, they really noticed how weird it felt. And, it became a concern with their manager speaking to me about, the fact that they weren't performing, they weren't productive. And I said, "Oh, okay. So maybe let's take a step back from them, about not performing, and being productive on their first day back after zero hours, and let's understand a bit more as to why."

**Damian:**

So, I said, "Go and have a conversation discretely, quietly, and let them talk the most." So, they did that and came back to me, and it was a whole different scenario where they had said, "Okay, this person's quite anxious, and I don't understand why." And so that was the scenario that I was worried about. And I think is quite important and a lot of businesses would be experiencing this, or not knowing that they're experiencing this. So, they had the talk and were grateful for the situation, but the next day was probably worse, and they were having panic attacks and being upset, and really in fight or flight mode. So I asked if I could talk to that employee, and I talked to them about the expectations, not to be hard on yourself, and so forth and went through the tools that, I was working on for the managers, with my team, and that ended up being really helpful.

**Damian:**

And I think up until that point, it was probably seen as a very light and fluffy HR exercise, to be honest. But it's not, there was huge value in that. About two weeks after that, I was presenting to our audit and risk committee as part of the board. And went through that exact scenario and gave that example. And credit to our board, they were really supportive of that, and asked some very practical questions around that as well. So really nice to be in a business that does get it and understands that their mental health is so important.

**Ainslie:**

So, what support tools do you have in place for employees like that? Do you have EAP, do you have, additional transition timeframes, and really trying to, I guess, manage that from an HR perspective, not just for the business, but for the employee as well?

**Damian:**

So, we do have an EAP in place. We extend that, and a couple of years ago we extended that EAP to our franchisees as well. So, we use a business called D'Accord, and they're fantastic at providing that solution, so we use them quite a bit. We do a lot of partnering with other businesses, so we use Employment Innovations, they have an Employment Hero product, which is a HR information system, and we use our payroll through them as well. And they're brilliant. They've done a lot of webinars and helped a huge amount. They're in a lot of businesses, they've helped a huge amount of businesses with this exact scenario. They've run things around the JobKeeper piece, and around the return to

work and so forth. So, we've worked really closely with them, and similarly with the National Retail Association, and they've probably been more beneficial on the franchisee side.

**Damian:**

So, I think working with other organisations is really important, and then just sharing information as well. And then with employees, we've definitely done a transition process. So anyone who could work from home we've said do that, try and come in, try and make contact. So we've just encouraged that contact in the meetings and the communication. As a company, we've always tried to communicate on, say a once a week basis, especially around JobKeeper, which was so-

**Deb:**

It was moving on a daily basis at one stage wasn't it?

**Damian:**

... So that was interesting as well, and for us to be able to provide that was really good. But I think, once you get the financial support, there, it's a matter of trying to get people back into the workplace. Even with, some employees, that I was really worried about, they'd been absent for a period of say, six weeks, I'd see them come into the office and we'd arrange for them to get some hours, so I'd go and have a chat to them. And I guess, pleasingly, it was more often than not that, they were telling me about their experience over that time, which was really good. So, they took a breath, they had that opportunity. Some of them even commented, you don't get this in your career.

**Damian:**

So, it was amazing for them. You get everything from, people adopting a dog, lots of that happened, and telling me everything about their dog to, someone, picking up surfing again, hadn't done it for ages, and now during that three times a day, fitter than they'd ever been. Someone else's partner, some contract work on one of the Stradbroke Islands, so they got to go and stay in the resort because the resorts were closed, and that was their experience. So really different things. Most of it was really positive.

**Ainslie:**

Any negative experiences?

**Damian:**

Not a lot. I think there were a few people. Generally, the comment came back that, the JobKeeper was good, and it really helped. We had a few that wouldn't qualify, they might've started after March 1, or they might not have had the residency requirements. But everyone found a way, and generally because, people couldn't go out and spend their money in places that they would normally spend it, people were able to save. So, there weren't a lot of negatives that in terms of, anecdotal information coming back in.

**Ainslie:**

Yeah. I think too, like the increase-

**Deb:**

The bottle shop was still open. Apparently.

**Ainslie:**

Increasing their home drinking, and homeschooling and-

**Damian:**

Yeah, I'm fortunate. My, my kids are a little bit older. I've got one that's 16, and one that's 14. So, my 14 year old's, right into ballet. She's doing distance education because she's with Queensland Ballet. And it was funny because we had the school, contact us to say that they needed some time out to adjust to, the working from home situation, which I found hilarious because they are distance education. But they did have to change some of their criteria as well. So, our kids were old enough that they could be self-managed, in terms of the school. So, the parents out there that had their five through to 12-year-old say, yes way more challenging. I got off lightly.

**Ainslie:**

I'm hearing you. Deb and I were on a conference call one day, and I've got my youngest who's nine come in, and she's hiding under the desk, she'd just made a new batch of slime, and she's pulling it through my hand. And I'm like...

**Deb:**

The next thing it's above her hair.

**Ainslie:**

Then she's coming behind me and Deb's like... She's behind me, and dogs running in. Then I look out the window one day, and she's wandering in the backyard in a nightie, with the dog. I was like, "Ah, I'm homeschooling..."

**Damian:**

Yep. And then you hear about all the Zoom files as well, which is just brilliant.

**Deb:**

It's so funny.

**Ainslie:**

In hilarious, that man who was toilet training, and he's son has come in with a surprise, and lots of different things. The naked wife in the background, and all those sorts of things. Back on point. So, in terms of, I guess your franchisees, how are their mental health fairing, is the EAP extended to them as a business owner as well?

**Damian:**

Yeah, it is. Again, I think each person's different. So, we've got a field team, they'll be dedicated to looking after a group of franchisees. So, it'll be by brand, and by location. They just do the best they can. They can be, I guess, caring and supportive, and coaching, as much as possible, but they can't be responsible for them. In terms of their own wellbeing and what's going on in their own family. They're there to listen. They're really good. Our field team is amazing in terms of the effort that they put in, the knowledge that they have of our franchisees and their families, and the work that they do in their businesses. So, that's more than we can ask of them to do. It's pretty all consuming, in terms of the role that our field team need to do.



**Ainslie:**

And in terms of, setting up for work from home, did you have to do any additional, checks from an HR perspective for, set up, and-

**Deb:**

Workplace health and safety concerns?

**Damian:**

Yeah, we did. So, it was a matter of providing that ergonomic checklist, and asking players to be responsible for themselves again. So again, you can't see what they're doing in their workplace. If they're like me, they're extremely clumsy. Probably better me working from the office. And, I think in that case, again, the feedback was really interesting about working from home because, they saved on the commute time, they saved on then getting ready time. Lunch was convenient, it was in a kitchen where they didn't have to wait for the microwave. So, there were all these things that came out of it that were different. I think the novelty wore off in some cases, they we're missing other human contact. But from a safety point of view, it was a matter of doing what we needed to do to get it done.

**Damian:**

And our employees, all did the right thing in terms of setting themselves up properly. So again, we'd give them a little bit of advice and tips about that. Set yourself up in one place so that you're not moving around or sitting on the lounge for half an hour and then sitting on the dining table for an hour. Get up, go for walks, take that dog for a walk again. All of that sort of thing, I think really helped as well. And then it was just staying in contact, trying to organise meetings so that people would dial in and have the meetings at the same time. And again, it was a matter of, I think even when I was working from home, you dial in, you forget that your camera operates straight away on the laptop. So, it's like, "Ah, yep. Okay."

**Ainslie:**

When you need the bandaid, on the camera.

**Deb:**

The ceiling fan. Pyjamas.

**Damian:**

I think the other thing for us was making sure that people, found what is good for them. So even throughout this process, and still going it's a matter of, there is anxiety around, the COVID-19 situation around workplaces. There's a lot of insecurity and fear for the future with the economy. So, I think that's a hard thing. And with anxiety being such a big thing, it's a matter of really saying to people, "Find what is good for you." So I don't think one size fits all. We did Yin Yoga towards the end of last year, we got our whole team outside to do that. And that was brilliant. We'll definitely do that again. And everyone loved that. So that's something that did tend to work for probably 90% or more of employees, but I think everyone's got to find their own thing to relax with. So, whether it be meditation, whether it be yoga, whether it be... I ride a motorbike, that's probably been the best thing for me in terms of being able to switch off. So, those sorts of things are really good.

**Ainslie:**

And have you found, the work from home mentality has changed from, an executive and board level where they have potentially had a negative perception of it in the past, where they think that it can't be done, and now they've been proven otherwise?

**Damian:**

That's a brilliant question. Yeah, I do, actually, I think it has changed a lot of company's view on it because it was forced. And, I think probably an old school thought process around that is, they're not going to be productive if they're being asked to work from home, or if they're requesting to work from home. It was always seen in the past, I think as a bit of a soft day, if someone was working from home. I know myself that my days from home are far more hectic and harder than when I'm at work, because you've got the convenience of being able to see people face to face, have a quick meeting, resolve something, move on. Whereas from home, you've got that extra challenge of trying to reach out to people. You don't have everything around you, so you can't operate off instinct, you have to think more.

**Damian:**

So, we've had some really good success with that. We had a period towards the end of last year as a corporate office where, we moved locations, so we relocated. And during that time we had, half of our workforce go into managed, or serviced offices, and the other half working from home. And that worked really well then, so it was actually a really good test and trial for us anyway. And our IT team were brilliant, they set it all up, made sure it all worked really well. And I think that's the other thing is, making sure that the technology of every business supports, you being able to work from home. So it's that business continuity piece. I think any business that's not done that, or considered that is probably at risk of, something happening where they're not going to operate, even close to their potential.

**Ainslie:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Deb:**

I think a lot of businesses are going to find it is a good opportunity to save on the real estate piece aren't they, and have more people working from home.

**Damian:**

Yeah, definitely, definitely. And more recently there's a lot of trend for having hot desks, and different workspaces at work. Whereas that's probably, not the predominant thing now, it's more around flexibility, and how to get the most out of people that way. And that they enjoy it and are motivated as well. So, it really comes back to the basics of, setting employees really clear goals, having the KPIs that they can perform too. It's not about how many minutes you're at work for, how many minutes you take lunch for. The way I operate with my team, is really flexible. If someone needs to work from home, they don't need to ask me, they tell me. So, they just say to me, "I'm going to be working from home." And that's fine. It's a trust situation where, if you give the trust, you give the autonomy, people know what they're setting out to achieve. It's really easy. And I actually think you get more back.

**Ainslie:**

Yeah. You're just managing that expectation piece really early on.

**Damian:**

I think too if you do that, you become really focused with, if they're going to be in the office for a day, you preplan, you set your meetings up, and you've got a real focus for that day anyway. So yeah, works well.

**Ainslie:**

In terms of managing meetings during this time, have you found, it's been, meeting overload? Have you found, you've had to, dial into this, meeting, that meeting, and it's probably been a lot more communication than you're used to?

**Damian:**

Not for me. In our team we have a weekly meeting, and that's really good. And then I have conversations with individuals as we go. And that tends to work really well for us. I think the meetings, again, really similar is that, each meeting should have an agenda, should have a start and finish time. And shouldn't get off track. I think you can have a little bit of lightheartedness and fun, I think that's really important. So, you've got that bit of social aspect to it. And again, it's just about having the rapport and having that real focus about what needs to be achieved. You can overdo it with meetings.

**Damian:**

Similarly, I think with businesses, they would have really noticed a decline in cost through travel, and all the associated costs of that as well. Where in the past, we're situated, around Australia mainly, Queensland, and New South Wales, and Victoria. So, we've obviously been restricted in terms of that travel, but you can still achieve all the outcomes without all the cost of that. You do miss that rapport though, face-to-face. I think every business is going to think differently about how they operate going forward. It's a real game changer for a lot of businesses.

**Ainslie:**

Yeah. That acceleration of the digital strategy too.

**Damian:**

Yep.

**Deb:**

And just the cost synergies, isn't it?

**Damian:**

Yeah, exactly. And that probably goes well with, the economic future is that, people are worried about the spending. So how do you run a fairly lean business and have that focus on your revenue going forward while keeping your costs, to a minimum.

**Deb:**

With your franchisees, how did they go negotiating with their landlords in terms of, rent abatement?

**Damian:**

Yeah, again, it's a collaborative process in that, depending on where they're situated. We might have a number of franchisees all going through to one landlord, so it might be that we do the representation for them, or with them. So, it varies depending on each of those situations. Again,

National Retail Association has been involved in, lobbying for those types of things, and they lobby to government for support as well. So, us being a member of them really helps.

**Ainslie:**

I think, too going back to your cost savings there, Damian I've even found, a lot of businesses are going out to employees and saying, "Look, we're just going to keep it this way now until the end of the year, and keep work from home in place." And like Deb mentioned, reduce that office footprint, keep the costs low, keep the travel down, keep that productiveness up, and I guess, try and get some chips in the bank for, going through the next recovery phase.

**Damian:**

Exactly right. And then when you are read about Victoria at the moment, it's going through-

**Ainslie:**

Second wave already.

**Damian:**

... A second wave, which is terrifying. Australians by nature, don't like being told twice to go to the corner. It's going to be a tough situation, I think. And so Victoria really needs to, I think, hit it really hard, and be quite restrictive now until they can get on top of that again. It's interesting, and I don't want to be political at all, but Queensland has come under a lot of scrutiny I think, around the borders but, it's probably been the safe process because, Queensland's really opened up a lot, and has been pretty safe in doing so. So, it's a tough situation state by state isn't it?

**Deb:**

It's not going to bode well for opening the Queensland border, though is it with-

**Damian:**

No.

**Deb:**

... Victoria's, resurgence?

**Damian:**

But then you gotta look at us compared to, overseas and some of the countries there are suffering, a lot worse.

**Ainslie:**

So with such a diverse background, and range of industries, in the benefit of hindsight has there been, some lessons learned over time that, you'd be able to share with our listeners today?

**Damian:**

In terms of?

**Ainslie:**

In terms of just the practicalities of, HR that cultural transformation piece, those growth and operational turnarounds, even like managing crisis response teams, and things like that. Is there

anything that you've learnt that, you would have gone, "Oh, I would have done that differently." Now with the benefit of hindsight?

**Damian:**

Yeah, I'll try and think of an example. I guess the key thing here is that, HR practitioners need to be very commercial in that, they need to get their hands dirty, understand what goes on in different business entities, or business units. HR is a busy job in itself. But you've got to know what your business does. And so, you've got to have that direct involvement. And I've tried to do that in each of the businesses that I've worked in. I can remember, at Hayman Island, it's a pretty warm climate up there. Christmas time is, high forties, very humid, or mid-forties, very humid. And then the commercial laundry would be the hottest place on the Island. So as the executive team, we used to get, out into the workplace at Christmas to help out, because there really wasn't a lot to do from a corporate, or support, or an administrative point of view, unless you had something that came up.

**Damian:**

But it was the operations that were under the pressure because it was Christmas and we were full, occupancy wise. So, when it was a matter of volunteering where you wanted to work, I would volunteer to work in the commercial laundry. It was the worst place to work in, in that time of year, but it was one that I felt I was... and my background is food and beverage mainly, not commercial laundry. So, I would get in there because I know how much they would be struggling. And for them to see someone out of the leadership team, dressed like I am today, walk in there and within 10 minutes not have a dry bit of material on, that was-

**Ainslie:**

Throw your clothes in the wash with them?

**Damian:**

... Yeah, it was exhausting. But I think that's where you earn it. I think it's a matter of, getting in rolling sleeves up, and being hands on. I think that's probably one of the best things I can advise HR people to do. And I think you can take a lot from one industry to another, in HR. So again, the hospitality and tourism side really lent itself to service culture, and I think that's brilliant for any business that you're in. So that's always been a really valuable thing for me as well.

**Ainslie:**

Yeah. The real customer service side, isn't it?

**Deb:**

So for those companies that don't have the benefit of an HR, person or department, what are your top tips for returning to work after this pandemic?

**Damian:**

Yeah, I would say that, there's really good information. The government's done a great job at providing information. So, if you go into Worksafe, if you go to the government website, there's a whole host of information, and they do break it down. They change it quite often, so you can't do it once, set it and forget it. You need to obviously look at that, and put a plan in place to revisit that. And I think the other thing is, your key partners. So if you are in a small business, and you're a member of a larger business, like a National Retail Association, or you've got other partners that you can work with, collaborate. Talk to them, find out what they're doing and work out best practice. You can also look at some of the bigger companies, and what they do.

**Damian:**

On their website, they promote their Worksafe plans. And they're not complex. You don't have to be overly complex with this. And then I think it's just a matter of, talk to your employees, give them comfort, make sure they understand that you're there for them and that you're listening. And that's probably the most important part. If you talk to your employees and say, "Right, what are your concerns?" So, if you speak to your CEO, what's keeping them awake? What are you worried about the most with this? So, you manage up and you manage down in terms of, understanding everyone's needs. So, it really is that. Ask the open ended questions and then listen to the answers, and then come up with a simple plan, and see that it's supported by what the government is recommending as an action plan for employers.

**Deb:**

Can I take my dog to work with me?

**Damian:**

Yes.

**Ainslie:**

I was actually going to ask that question too. Is it something that you would then consider, as a workplace going forward, to allow people to bring their pets in that, they've become quite comfortable with?

**Damian:**

I think it depends on the pet. I couldn't take mine. It'd be a nightmare. I like the idea. Anyone who has... I'm more of a dog person than a cat person. I'll put that out there now.

**Ainslie:**

So, don't bring your cat to work?

**Damian:**

No. Couldn't imagine. But dogs are therapy all over, so they're just good for you. They know who's stressed in the family. They tend to sit with that person the most, at the time that they're in the need of it. So, if we go through a bit of stress at home... I will elaborate just for a minute there. My oldest child, is high functioning autistic, who's going through a trans process at the moment. So, there's a whole heap of, challenge, confrontation, tears, laughter, the whole bit. And it's a very full on process. And it affects all of us. And so, our dog knows who's stressed the most, and most anxious, and he literally, jumps up on the lounge and presses against whoever is, not feeling that happy, and sits there. And it's that exchange of energy, I'm sure of it. So yeah, back to the question, I'd love to see more of that. I think it's great, but you have to find a dog that's not going to be completely distracting as well. So, I'd be distracted.

**Ainslie:**

There's the social doggy extrovert.

**Damian:**

Yes.

**Deb:**

And small dog syndrome.

**Damian:**

Yes.

**Ainslie:**

Yes, we've got one of those. So in terms of remote living, what were your challenges and how did you fare through that, even for fly in, fly out sort of people, what tips could you offer in terms of mental resilience, and weathering that storm?

**Damian:**

Really good question, and the resilience is the key there. I think it's setting small goals and seeing you achieve those goals is critical to that. Socially remote areas are amazing. Some of my best friends have come out of remote areas. Nearly all of them are from remote areas, to be honest. You develop a really close network. My wife and I met while I was living out at, Uluru. Even though she wasn't there to start with, she was based in our Sydney office. It's enjoy what you've got in front of you. And again, I've just listened to a podcast, which is called the Resilience Project, recently. And, it talks about, GEM which has gratitude, empathy, and mindfulness, and it's about appreciating what you've got. So, whether it's a remote area or otherwise, I think that's really important. But remote areas, it's key to get that balance of what you're there for, setting yourself the goals, planning to get away, and really enjoying your time.

**Deb:**

I think gratitude's is one of those ones in any moment, that you just have to sit back and go, "Well, I've got a nose to smell with, I've got a mouth to eat with. Just the little things, that we take for granted.

**Damian:**

Yep, absolutely.

**Deb:**

Especially when times get tough.

**Ainslie:**

You tend to focus on what you don't have instead of, what you do. I'll be happy when.....

**Damian:**

100%.

**Deb:**

Finish that sentence.

**Damian:**

That's exactly what this podcast talked about as well. He was talking about, and I won't talk too much about his podcast, but going visiting areas that had nothing, and they were the most, joyous, happy, content, people. So, there's a lot to be said for it, I think is, the practice of that first.

**Ainslie:**

And in terms of M&A and culture transformation, have you found that, even this current climate, and the pandemic, and the scenario, has really been similar in terms of that change management curve, and really managing the emotional roller coaster that people go through. Has that been similar in any way?

**Damian:**

Yeah, I think the emotional part of it's been heightened. I think it's coming more into the fore, which is important. Whenever you're going through a transformation, I think that agile project management approach is still key. But the emotional component is definitely a bigger part of that now. So, I think that's going to be playing more of a role, in any change process. And I think people are understanding, the fact that you've got to listen, you've got to appreciate where people are at, and then get them engaged in the process that you're going through as well. I think it'll probably change, just heighten the respect for, the emotional component of change.

**Deb:**

Have you found people to be more empathetic?

**Damian:**

Yeah, definitely. I think, as I said, when we started this process and we looked at some support tools, it was probably seen as a little bit of the HR warm and fuzzy, but as it came out and as there were real examples, it did get valued. Then, more has come out in terms of the media on that. And for it to be, an important topic for our board, I'm so appreciative of that because, it means that they're looking at the things that are important from an HR point of view, which is key. So HR has the ability to influence a lot around, engagement and capability for organisations. And that's where, if the board are aligned to that and value that, that's huge as far as the business future goes.

**Ainslie:**

You mentioned that you're a part of a team of introverts Damian. So, at the start of this, there was a big, heightened focus on the introverts, and that they would really suffer during this time. How have you found it for an introvert?

**Damian:**

Okay. So, Tara is going to get a call out here. So, Tara works in my team and, will own up to being an introvert. So, she was in the US when this all broke out. She was nearly halfway through, a nearly nine week trek through US. Really exciting, South central US. And they had to come back, which was terrible. They'd been planning this for quite some time, and Tara is very much an introvert. And so she came back and self-isolated. And then do you think I could get it to come back to the office? It's been an effort. We laugh about it but, she didn't want to come back at all. And even now in saying that she's enjoying the practice of being at home more. So again, this is where flexibility comes into it. And if you've got people that are a bit more introverted, and they will work really well by themselves, then I think you've just got to be flexible in that approach to it.

**Deb:**

I think they were more concerned about the extroverts than introverts weren't they?

**Damian:**

Yeah. Look, I agree, I think it's the extroverts that have really struggled, with home isolation. They would have been driven nuts, in that they couldn't see people, they couldn't go out.



**Deb:**

Talking to the walls.

**Damian:**

Yeah, yeah. Pets weren't enough. So, yeah, I think they really needed the social contact which, I think the extroverts have been challenged the most with this.

**Ainslie:**

And in terms of, HR practitioner roles, will you find, do you think, an increase in that space where people now have realised that they are actually liking being from home more, and maybe going to that sort of consulting space where they just live out the dream now?

**Damian:**

I don't know. I think there's a lot to be shaped, coming out of this. It does depend on the next six to 12 months, I think. So, having a look at what the economy does, having a look at what can be forged in terms of business opportunities in the next six to 12 months will determine that. I think there are good opportunities, but it's just a matter of... Smart people will get onto it pretty quickly and set themselves up where they can provide support to other businesses. But I think it's balance. I think there's still a need for HR practitioners to be very much hands on, involved in businesses. There's, small to medium businesses. You've got to be there to support them, understand what they're going through, the rhythm of what they're doing, the challenges, and be on the frontline as much as possible.

**Deb:**

And presumably, a fair amount of support, for franchisees that are going through a hard time, and having to look at selling down businesses and things like that.

**Damian:**

And that's where from our point of view, it's really understanding, "Okay, well, what's going to drive foot traffic? What's going to drive sales for them? How do we help them with managing their costs?" And that's really our focus. So, we continually look at our business, and the model of it and say, "Right, are we giving them the best value being part of our network?" And again, it's different for everyone, different for every brand, different for every location, different for every size, every store, each franchisee brings a different skillset. We've got some amazing franchisees that have come from really diverse backgrounds. So, they might've started off as an engineer, but ended up in, franchising. So, it's really interesting.

**Deb:**

Have they been providing quite a good support network to each other?

**Damian:**

Yes, they do. They do. And again, it varies. We've got people who'd be fairly new franchisees, and some will have a council. And so they help, the franchisees as well. So yeah, the community environment for it is very good.

**Ainslie:**

Be interesting to see what the Franchise Council of Australia does this year in terms of, because normally they get together and have their national conference, and it just gives that opportunity for even, franchisees that aren't part of the RFG group to, potentially bring some other ideas to the table

for each other. It'll be interesting to see what they do this year. So, as we wrap up for today, Damian, is there any top tips you want to leave with SMEs for today, from an HR perspective? Or any other top HR tips you'd like to wade in on?

**Damian:**

Yeah. I think if I talk about, the COVID-19 situation, I think again, it's probably, look for other businesses that have been through this, there's some great information out there. Collaborate, with people that you're partnering with as well. So that you're getting that really good community feel for how to approach it. Communicate regularly with your employees, the more you communicate the better. And then listen. So, it's got to be two way, listen to what they're saying. And I think, really you can apply that to nearly everything you're doing from a SME point of view, to look after your employees. This is the time to really do that. Look after employees and your customers, and that will pay off in the long run.

**Ainslie:**

Well, thank you so much today for joining us, Damian. It's been great to listen to, your background and the insights that you bring to the table from an HR perspective.

**Damian:**

No, thank you very much. I've really enjoyed it. Cheers.

**Outro:**

That's all for today until next time, happy podcasting. And remember if you're enjoying the show, check out our other episodes and all things governance at [www.3ysowls.com.au](http://www.3ysowls.com.au).