YS UP GOVERNANCE AND BOARDS PODCAST

Episode 25 – Culture, Leadership and the Rules of Belonging with Fiona Robertson

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.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Welcome to another episode of YS Up. Today, we're joined by Fiona Robertson. Fiona is a culture and leadership expert who holds an MBA from London Business School and is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership.

Ainslie Cunningham:

She is the former head of culture for the National Australia Bank (NAB), where she spent 12 years in senior executive positions. She is now an independent speaker, facilitator, executive coach and author. Fiona has consulted to dozens of large and small blue-chip organisations domestically and internationally with all levels of government in Australia and coached numerous senior executives.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Clients have included ANZ, AGSM, RMIT, Monash College, IBM, NASDAQ, NCR, Oracle and McKinsey & Company. Her first book, Rules of Belonging - change your organisational culture, delight your people and turbo-charge your results, was published in 2020. Welcome, Fiona.

Fiona Robertson:

Thanks very much for having me.

Deb Anderson:

Impressive bio, Fiona.

Fiona Robertson:

I've certainly had some fun in my career. That's for sure.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. And congratulations on the book launch.

Fiona Robertson:

Thank you. Yes, it's been an interesting learning curve. You look at writing a book and you think that the writing is the hard part. I've learned an awful lot about what it takes to publish books. And so, my respect for those who have gone before has increased through this process. That's for sure.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Very good. And did you have the book launch that you envisaged during this time or?

Fiona Robertson:

No. I think you could safely say it wasn't quite the way I planned it. It was in early June and of course ... well, not of course. Your listeners don't know but I'm based in Melbourne. So, we were in the midst of lockdown and so we had an online book launch.

Fiona Robertson:

It was interesting though because it meant that what might have been a more intimate face-to-face affair with posh champagne or whatever I was planning, turned into what ended up being a much larger exercise. Because we had a couple of 100 people from all over the place, which is something you couldn't do if it was face to face, so pros and cons.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Absolutely. So how has it been writing a book?

Fiona Robertson:

Look, I've thoroughly enjoyed it. Although I love the quote ... I don't even know who said it but somebody once said, "I hate writing but I love having written." So certainly, looking back on it is easier than looking forward and being in the middle of it. I've enjoyed it though for a couple of reasons.

Fiona Robertson:

Firstly, it gave me the perfect opportunity to really refine down my own thoughts and ideas and hone them down to messages that were clear and succinct. And one of the things I think is the greatest problem with organisational cultures is it's been so overcomplicated. So, it was a really great opportunity to just make it something that was accessible and easy for leaders to understand and therefore, act upon.

Fiona Robertson:

And I think too just the opportunity to be able to share what I've learned, some of which has been hard-won experience. Being able to share that has been enormously satisfying. And I've been really gratified by the response to the book. I've been getting a lot of positive feedback and people are recommending it and so on, so that's obviously a lovely feeling.

Deb Anderson:

What was the catalyst for you to write the book, Fiona?

Fiona Robertson:

Well, after I left the National Australia Bank, I decided that I was going to start my own consulting practice. So, I really enjoy helping leaders and particularly, helping them understand what culture really is because I think there's a lot of discussion about it. In fact, I think culture is probably the most widely discussed and possibly the most widely misunderstood concept in business today.

Fiona Robertson:

So having lived that and being frustrated by it, I felt that there was a real need to put a new perspective on what culture really is and what it isn't, and help people understand that what you really need to change sits under the surface of behaviour. So, yeah. I guess it was my own frustration with some of that misunderstanding, that ambiguity, this overly complex idea of culture and wanting to just make it accessible.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, what should culture look like?

Fiona Robertson:

Culture should look like whatever it needs to look like to accelerate the execution of strategy. So, one of the problems that I've seen happen very frequently is that conversations about strategy and conversations about culture are separated. So, there's a lot of talk about what our new strategy should be, particularly at this time.

Fiona Robertson:

Pretty much every organisation I know, large and small, is rethinking its strategy for obvious reasons. But the question I very rarely hear asked is, "Do we have the culture to execute a desired strategy?" Because the old chestnut, strategy eats culture for breakfast, what that's essentially trying to say is you can have ... Sorry.

Fiona Robertson:

I said strategy eats culture for breakfast. I've got it around the wrong way. I beg your pardon. Culture eats strategy for breakfast. But the reality is nobody really eats anybody for breakfast because if culture and strategy aren't eating at the table together, then you've got a real problem.

Fiona Robertson:

So, I see strategy happening in isolation, I also see a lot of work on culture in isolation. So, working on your culture in the absence of for what reason is usually an exercise in trying to make everybody feel good. But neither of those things in isolation is going to lead to organisational performance. Only when they are really linked together are you going to see an increase in performance.

Fiona Robertson:

So, your question, what should culture look like? I think there's an underlying assumption that I would take issue with. I don't mean in your question, but I mean just generally in business, that there is one good culture that we should all somehow be aspiring to. And I don't believe that's true.

Fiona Robertson:

I think unless everybody has got the same strategy, then they shouldn't have the same culture. So, the answer to the question is your culture should be whatever it needs to be to accelerate the execution of your strategy.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think too it's very industry-centric as well and size of the organisation and all those fun facts.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And I think too, from our perspective, from a governance framework perspective, it's really good to have not just strategy and culture humming together, but also the operational and risk management sides of the business as well and have a more holistic cohesive approach to an organisation as well. So, yeah. No, that's really good.

Fiona Robertson:

Look, I totally agree. And interestingly, the approach to risk is often a cultural issue. So, the degrees of acceptance of risk, whether it's operational or in the case of a bank where I was – it was credit risk, whichever way you look at risk, often, that is a cultural issue. And so, I think all of these things are really closely linked and need to be to work together.

Deb Anderson:

So, if somebody asked you the question, how would you define culture, Fiona? How would you define it?

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. I think that is the question actually. I see a lot of confusion about this. So, people talk about it a lot but I'm not quite sure most people really understand exactly what it is that you're talking about when you're talking about culture. So, for me, I've named my book The Rules of Belonging and that's because that's how I define culture.

Fiona Robertson:

And the reason that I define it that way is because I think culture is what happens under the surface of behaviour. So, I have seen organisations where identical behaviour between two different organisations is interpreted very differently and the interpretation of that behaviour is actually where culture lives.

Fiona Robertson:

So, the way this works is actually based on the fact that the human brain is essentially unchanged from about 80,000 years ago. And back in those days, it was necessary for us to belong in groups in order to survive. So, belonging in groups is, in fact, the most fundamental need of human beings.

Fiona Robertson:

And that means that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the thing we're all taught at school that tells us that food, water and shelter at the bottom of that pyramid, food, water and shelter are the most basic needs of human beings. That's actually been proven now to be incorrect, which sounds ridiculous I know as I speak it.

Fiona Robertson:

But it's only ridiculous in the context of our modern world because 80,000 years ago, if you were not a member of a group, you wouldn't get access to food, water and shelter, and you would die. So, the actual, most fundamental need of a human being is belonging in groups.

Fiona Robertson:

So the reason that this has got any relevance to organisational culture is because that hard wiring is so deep in us, in our subconscious minds, that we have a subconscious that is essentially screaming at us, "If you don't belong, you will die." And most of us have no idea that this is going on.

Fiona Robertson:

But the way it plays out in organisations is that when you join a new group, so you might join a new team or a new organisation, we have evolutionary superpowers that allow us to figure out very quickly what it takes to earn belonging in this group and as well what loses belonging in this group.

Fiona Robertson:

So, we look around and we figure out what is successful behaviour in this group and slowly but surely, we adopt that behaviour as our own. So, we go native and start to adopt ... people say, "The way we do things around here." That's essentially the rules of belonging, what it takes to earn belonging in this place, so what is successful behaviour and what it takes to lose it.

Fiona Robertson:

And once you have earned your belonging based on the existing set of rules in the organisation or the team, then it becomes in your interests to keep that set of rules the same, which is one of the reasons why change can be so difficult in organisations and particularly, changing culture.

Fiona Robertson:

So, my definition of culture is it is the rules of belonging in the group and the only way I've ever seen to change culture is to change those rules of belonging.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yes. Very good analogy, Fiona. That's very good. So in terms of, I guess, examples of where you've seen culture played out very well, whether it be leaders or underlying operational teams or the board, what sort of things have you seen executed to develop a really rewarding and positive culture?

Fiona Robertson:

Look, it's a great question. The first thing I would say that's absolutely essential is that you have to first notice what your culture is. And I think that's a much harder thing to do than people will often realise. So, I speak to a lot of board directors who say, "Don't worry. We're monitoring culture because we have an engagement survey."

Fiona Robertson:

So, there's this underlying assumption that engagement and culture are either the same thing, which they're not, or that they are extremely closely related. Now, there are relationships, but they are fundamentally different things. So, culture is the underlying system or what I call the rules of belonging and engagement is an employee's experience of that system.

Fiona Robertson:

So those are not the same thing. And the kinds of questions that are asked in engagement surveys are not ever going to get to what the underlying culture actually is. So, an example I could give is, let's say, the boss sacked Harry. No engagement survey will ever ask your people, "Why do you think the boss sacked Harry? And what do you think about that?"

Fiona Robertson:

So, if people believe that the boss sacked Harry because the boss thought that Harry was unethical, then that's going to have a very positive impact on your culture. If people believe that the boss sacked Harry because the boss didn't like Harry, that's going to have a very negative impact on your culture. So, the first thing people need to do is notice and genuinely measure what their culture is.

Fiona Robertson:

So, what are the rules of belonging in this group? What is approved of? What is disapproved of? And so, what is the interpreted behaviour, not what is the observed behaviour. Those are two very different things. So that's the first step is you can't change anything. You can't make choices about anything until you first notice what it is.

Fiona Robertson:

And then, of course, once you've noticed and you've established what your current rules of belonging are, then the next question is, "Well, what do you want them to be?" And that goes back to what I said earlier. The answer to that is you want them to be whatever it takes to accelerate the execution of your strategy.

Fiona Robertson:

And then, of course, the next question is, "How am I going to move from one to the other?" So one of the most effective ways of getting culture to shift is being really explicit about what you want the future to look like and then making sure that the behaviours that you want to encourage more of are the behaviours that earn belonging, are the behaviours that get approval, are the behaviours that are safer.

Fiona Robertson:

So, the new behaviours have to be safer for you than the old. So that, again, doesn't answer the question here, what is the perfect culture, because as I said before, the perfect culture is whatever it takes to execute your strategy. But that outlines what it takes to decide what that should be and shift from one to the other.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, what about where there's an organisation that Harry is fundamental in executing on strategy and then Harry suddenly decides to leave for personal reasons to focus on his family? And reading between the lines that Harry was probably moved sideways, where there might be, I guess, a little bit of miscommunication between CEO and underlying management.

Fiona Robertson:

So I don't believe there's anyone on earth who ever believes that message, "I've left to spend more time with my family," which is actually tragic when you think about it because some people continually do leave to spend more time with their family. But no one believes that.

Fiona Robertson:

So, they will assume that Harry jumped or he was pushed. And as I said before, what matters is why people think that happened? So, they will make that judgment based on what they know of him, they will make that judgment based on what they know of his manager and what they've seen around the rest of the organisation.

Fiona Robertson:

If he is a person who is critical to operations, but has been behaving poorly, for example, I always think that's a good thing. I'm just trying to remember who it was who said that people who achieve results with poor behaviours should be taken out and publicly shot because the means do not justify the ends or the ends do not justify the means.

Fiona Robertson:

I'm getting both things around the wrong way today. It's really essential that the way we do things is as important as the results we get. So again, it comes back to why do people think Harry left? And they'll make their own decision.

Fiona Robertson:

They'll come to their own conclusion about that. And unless somebody asks them what their conclusion is, you'll never know. You're essentially just flying blind from there on.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, would it be a better, I guess, outcome for an organisation to rip the band aid off and be a little bit more transparent in those sorts of circumstances and say, "Well, Harry wasn't performing," or-

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. Look, that's a great question and it has no simple answer because every situation is obviously going to be very nuanced. And I think one of the most important things is that people who do leave the organisation are treated with dignity and respect regardless ... well, almost regardless of the reason for their departure.

Fiona Robertson:

I mean, obviously, if they've done something illegal or immoral, that would be a caveat. But for the most part, one would like to show dignity to the people who have left. So it is a tricky situation. I know we're talking a lot about somebody being fired or leaving the organisation today and that's obviously one example, but I think it is an important one to examine.

Fiona Robertson:

I think that where there is any sort of immoral or unethical behaviour, I actually think that people don't need a lot of information to be able to come to their own conclusions. I think that being reasonably clear about that, that there wasn't a fit here, is enough for people to go, "Okay. Something wasn't working there," and then they'll come to their own conclusions.

Fiona Robertson:

I do think it's very important to think about this notion. You've probably heard this idea before of psychological safety. So, there's a professor, Amy Edmondson, who's done a lot of work in this area. And what she discovered was that the single most important factor in effective teamwork is psychological safety.

Fiona Robertson:

So, people feeling that they will be given the benefit of the doubt if they admit a mistake, if they ask a question, if they challenge the status quo, if they have a new idea.

Fiona Robertson:

If people feel that they will be well-treated and they are psychologically safe, so essentially, they won't lose belonging, by doing any of those things, then you are likely to see better performance and a generally better culture with some nuance depending on the strategy that you're trying to execute.

Deb Anderson:

So, in your experience, how effective do you think engagement surveys work?

Fiona Robertson:

So, I think they can be useful. I think they're a great catalyst for good quality conversations with your people to figure out what it is that they enjoy about the workplace and what they feel needs to change. I do not however think they will tell you if there is an underlying problem with your culture.

Fiona Robertson:

So, my team and I ran the engagement survey at NAB for about five years that told us everything was fine and then we ran a culture diagnostic that told us a very different story. I'm not telling tales here. This is public. It came out through the Royal Commission.

Fiona Robertson:

So, I just don't believe that engagement surveys will tell you about culture. They'll tell you about engagement and that's not nothing, but I mean, I think they're necessary but not sufficient is probably the short answer.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. There's, I guess, a bit of a mixed opinion about engagement surveys and having had to answer them a lot myself. And you get people who go, "Oh, I didn't answer that honestly for fear of retribution or to just tell people what they think they want to hear."

Deb Anderson:

The lack of anonymity.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yes.

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. And look, it's incredibly difficult. I know that most larger organisations go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that the feedback that's gathered from their people is completely unidentifiable. But as I said before, the facts and what people believe are not necessarily the same thing and people will act on what they believe regardless of the facts.

Fiona Robertson:

So, it's really tricky. And I think asking the kinds of questions that I would like to ask, so, "Why do you think the boss did X or Y and what do you think about that," is not the kind of thing that you're ever going to get from a survey.

Fiona Robertson:

It really is going to come down to focus group type qualitative research and done by someone skilled enough to be nonthreatening and yet to be able to hear for what is said and what is unsaid. So, it's quite a nuanced skill. And I think any self-respecting board who is not doing that kind of research amongst their people is definitely missing some of what is going on under the surface for their people.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And how do you feel, I guess, culture is driven or not driven by particular incentives for executives, whether it be performance plans or bonuses or things like that? And obviously, they're coming under a fair amount of scrutiny at the moment with pressures put on business models and compressed cash flows, etc. How do you think they're driving culture at the moment?

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. I think they're absolutely critical. But interestingly, not necessarily because of the money but because of what they signal is good, what good looks like around here. So, I can give you a well-known example. The US Bank Wells Fargo was for years held up as this absolutely perfect example of cross-sell, so a number of products per customer, for example.

Fiona Robertson:

And banks all around the world were looking at them with great envy and saying, "We have to do what they're doing." And people were rolling out their sales methodology left, right and centre.

Fiona Robertson:

And what ended up being the case was that their targets were set so high that the bankers there had to start to open accounts that their customers didn't even know about and transmit tiny amounts of money between them to make them look like they were active accounts.

Fiona Robertson:

And once this practice was so widespread that the only way to achieve your target was to do the same, then it became completely endemic. And in the end, they had to fire 5,300 bankers.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Wow.

Fiona Robertson:

Now, I look at that situation and I say to myself, "That's not 5,300 individually unethical human beings. That is people who had no other way to belong in that place than to do that same behaviour." That's what belonging became in that place. And it was a result of a poorly set target that was just completely unachievable.

Fiona Robertson:

And that's not a bad apple in the barrel, that's a bad barrel. And that's what culture is. Those kinds of rules set what good looks like around here and what it takes to belong. And people will do almost anything for belonging, particularly if there's a pay cheque attached to it.

Deb Anderson:

How do you turn that around, Fiona?]

Fiona Robertson:

I mean, I'm not an expert in remuneration and there are whole industries of experts in this space, but the question I would encourage every executive to ask themselves is, "What does it take to belong in this place?" And hope that the things that it does take to belong are, in fact, the things you want to see more of.

Fiona Robertson:

So that's the fundamental question. And it's easy to say that, it's obviously hard to do. It's not easy, but it is simple. What do we want to see more of? Let's make sure that that is approved of. And as I said, it's not necessarily about the money. I know another example of a sales organisation who allowed ... Firstly, they had an annual convention back in the days when that was a thing.

Fiona Robertson:

And they would go to exotic locations. I don't know whether that was Hawaii, but something of that ilk. And the salespeople who got to go there were lauded. And one year, they decided that they would allow their salespeople to buy with real money, points that would earn them the right to go to this convention.

Fiona Robertson:

And many of their salespeople did so. So, they actually ended up spending more of their own money than it would have cost them to simply go on a holiday to that same exotic location. But they were so desperate to appear like they belonged in that group that they spent their own money to buy these points to go along to this convention and when interviewed afterwards, said that it was the best money they've ever spent.

Fiona Robertson:

So, people will do almost anything to belong in the kind of groups that they want to be seen to be part of. And that relational question is not often asked. So, what do people want to see themselves as?

Fiona Robertson:

That question is not often asked in the same terms as remuneration. So, I would encourage anyone who's thinking about remuneration to think about the relational and not just the financial rewards.

Deb Anderson:

Interesting study in human behaviour, isn't it?

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. Astonishing.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Interesting psyche there. So, in terms of, I guess, retaining the right talent as well, what cultural drivers sit behind that? If you remove the incentivisation from a monetary perspective, what other things could you be doing to attract the right talent and retain the right talent?

Fiona Robertson:

Look, the one thing I've seen a lot of, which I think doesn't work, is I've seen a lot of people who try to recruit their way to a new culture. So, the logic seems sound when you first look at it. So, they'll say things like, "If we just hire more ethical people, then we'll have more ethical decision-making.

Fiona Robertson:

If we just hire people who are more creative, then we'll get more innovation," and so on and so forth. And what happens is that those people will join the organisation and they'll do what I said before. They'll look around, they'll figure out what it takes to belong in that place and they will slowly, but surely begin to adopt that behaviour as their own or they will opt out.

Fiona Robertson:

So, if they feel that they can't or won't earn belonging in their new place, they will opt out either through their own choice or because the immune system of the organism will reject them. And so that whole idea of, "We can recruit our way to a new culture," just doesn't work. People go native or they leave. And so that's not really answering your exact question.

Fiona Robertson:

You asked me, what does it take to attract the right talent? So the question I'm asking is, "Well, what's the right talent?" I think all of us have been in that experience of our careers where someone has said to us, "I'm hiring you because I want you to shake things up. I want you to come in here and change a few things."

Fiona Robertson:

And then you'll arrive in that new organisation all gung ho, ready to change things and discover that somehow or other, nobody wants to change anything. All the suggestions you make about what could be improved and how things could be done differently and better, people will find all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways to tell you, "Well, yeah, sure.

Fiona Robertson:

But I'm pretty sure that the way we've been doing it is fine and we want to keep things the way they are." And that's, again, back to this idea that once I've earned my belonging through a particular set of rules, then it becomes in my interests to enforce those rules, even though most people don't know why this is happening to them.

Fiona Robertson:

And it's because their subconscious is screaming, "If I don't belong here, I will die," and any change is a potential threat to that belonging. So yeah, attracting and retaining the right talent and the intersection with culture change is a really interesting question and not at all as simple as sometimes it's made out to be.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. I think that's a perfect example of the flaws in change management. And a lot of times, they'll bring in a chief transformation officer or something like that and there's no communication lines there about what's going to change, what's not going to change.

Ainslie Cunningham:

"Let's all get on the bus, let's all go on the journey together," and having those right frameworks in place that manage any hostility or deviation from the plan.

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah, it's a really interesting one. I mean, one of my favorite researchers is a guy called Matthew Lieberman. He heads up the Cognitive Neuroscience Unit at UCLA.

Fiona Robertson:

And he did a fascinating experiment, which proves that the human brain cannot distinguish social pain from physical pain, which sounds like an extraordinary thing to say. I think it's probably worth me just describing the experiment briefly-

Ainslie Cunningham:

Sure.

Fiona Robertson:

... because I think it's a fascinating study. So firstly, they were able to use new technology, which is something called a functional MRI machine. So MRI machines used to be the big tube you had to

lie in and all of that. But now, there's a thing called a functional MRI machine, which is essentially, you can wear an MRI machine on your head while you're doing things.

Fiona Robertson:

And that means neurologists and neuroscientists can study us while we're in the middle of an activity. So that was the technology that was used in this experiment. And they got the subject of the experiment and asked them to sit in front of a screen and told them that they were going to be throwing a ball. There's an electronic ball between themselves and two other people.

Fiona Robertson:

Now, they were actually playing against computers, but they believed that there were other people involved. And in round one of the experiment, they were told, "I'm awfully sorry. We're having some connection problems.

Fiona Robertson:

You can't join in right now, but could you please just sit and watch the other two people throwing the ball between them for a moment or two while we get it sorted out?" So of course, they were using that as a baseline for the experiment. And in the second round of the experiment, they're told, "Okay. Your console is working now. Our connection problems are solved. You can join in."

Fiona Robertson:

And so, this notional ball that was being thrown between the three people. They were throwing it between them for a few minutes. But then after a little while, the other two people started throwing it just between them again. So the subject of the experiment was watching exactly the same thing, two people throwing a ball between them, but the first time around, they believed that they couldn't participate.

Fiona Robertson:

And the second time around, they believed they were being deliberately excluded by the other people. And all the pain centres in their brain lit up like a Christmas tree, exactly the same pain centres that if you'd hit your thumb with a hammer. And then they interviewed the people afterwards who were the subject of the experiment and they asked them, "To what extent did you feel excluded?"

Fiona Robertson:

And they were able to show that the greater the feeling of exclusion, the greater the pain centres lit up. So, it actually does make sense if you think about the history of the brain. Like I said, it hasn't changed for 80,000 years. And back then, if you weren't a member of a group, you would die. So this idea of being excluded is genuinely painful.

Fiona Robertson:

And that's not just an analogy, that's an actual physical physiological fact that pain is experienced in the brain exactly the same through social and physical means. So when you think about applying that to organisations and organisational culture, you bring in the chief transformation officer and they say to you, "I'm going to change everything," and your brain says, "If you change everything, my belonging is at risk."

Fiona Robertson:

And my brain believes that that is a threat to life. It might be a threat to my role. It might be a threat to my status. It might be a threat to my ability to earn income and feed my family but my brain is saying, "This is a threat to life."

Fiona Robertson:

And most people have no idea that this is going on for them all the time. And it shapes so much of our behaviour. So yes, that was a long explanation, but I think it's a fascinating insight into the way we actually work and one that we're completely unaware of most of the time.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And I think too from an operational perspective where you're not consulted on changes that might affect you indirectly or directly, you become frustrated by the process and go, "Well, why didn't you just ask me first? And I could have told you, "You could do this and you can do that, but you can't do this because of compliance reasons or regulatory requirements."

Ainslie Cunningham:

And then when they find out and they go, "Oh, actually, we can't do it that way. Let's do it this way." And then before you know it, you've had three rounds at it and you then start suffering change fatigue because you're like, "We're now going through the whole process again." When if you just had a longer consultation period and had more people involved in the decision-making process, it would have actually resulted in a far better outcome.

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah. It's so true. It's really interesting. I often hear people tell me that humans are bad at change or people just don't like change. It's garbage to say that humans are bad at change, I'm afraid. That is simply not true. We can change on a dime. We are breathtakingly, spectacularly good at change in the service of our own belonging.

Fiona Robertson:

So, where it keeps us safe, we can absolutely change overnight. And we've all done it in the last few months. And we've got this global experiment of change, which has fundamentally shifted everything in incredibly quick time. But if somebody tells you ... I think a good example, so when you've got a boss who hates PowerPoint, you obviously communicate with them in some other way.

Fiona Robertson:

And then the next day, you get a new boss who loves PowerPoint, then you immediately start becoming fabulous at PowerPoint. We can absolutely change, but we've got to know why, and it's got to be safer to do the new behaviour than it was to do the old.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yeah. I'm just laughing to myself when you say that because I had a boss that ... I absolutely loved colour-coordinating everything and I had every different colour highlighter and I used it for everything and segmented everything in a way, which I thought was amazing because visually, you could differentiate.

Ainslie Cunningham:

I didn't realise my new boss was colour blind. And so, he was like, "Oh, no, no. We can't do that." And I was like, "Okay. Numbers sounds good." So, yeah.

Fiona Robertson:

Overnight, you suddenly became fabulous at number-coding instead of color-coding.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Yes, absolutely.

Deb Anderson:

So, in your research, Fiona, what were some of the common virtues of good leaders that you came across?

Fiona Robertson:

So definitely, this idea of psychological safety comes out very strongly. So, the ability to create a sense of curiosity and a sense of safety. So leaders who ask rather than tell as a primary mechanism

of leading their people. Leaders who genuinely understand that leading others is a skill and one that is very important and one that can be and should be developed.

Fiona Robertson:

So I've seen a lot of leaders over the years who have been technical specialists and they might be an exceptional technology person or finance person or risk person or HR person or whatever kind of person and then they are given a team to lead.

Fiona Robertson:

And often, in those early stages, they really struggle to let go of their identity as the expert in their technical specialist, whatever they're technical specialist in, and genuinely embrace the idea that their role is about leading others.

Fiona Robertson:

So people who really understand that and take the time and put in the effort to develop those skills and create that environment of safety where every single member of the team knows that they will be heard, they will be respected.

Fiona Robertson:

And they will be given the benefit of the doubt if they make a mistake, if they challenge the status quo, if they ask a question or have a new idea, that that's a safe thing for them to do. And leaders who create that environment get the absolute best out of their people because the brain is a threat detection pattern recognition machine.

Fiona Robertson:

And any hint that a question that you've asked is disapproved of or when you've made a mistake that somehow, that is a sin rather than a mistake, again, we have these evolutionary superpowers that show, the raised eyebrow, the deep sigh, the crossed arms, we know what all of those things mean.

Fiona Robertson:

And we have this threat detection pattern recognition machine that can't tell the difference between social pain and physical pain and is there to keep us safe and we'll avoid that social pain. So, without that psychological safety, you're not ever going to get the best out of your people.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, do you think that requires more training at senior managers and middle management level as well to help foster and cultivate that type of environment?

Fiona Robertson:

Yeah, I do. I mean, because I do some leadership development, I don't think it's possible to have enough leadership development. I don't think anyone's ever fully baked. We all have things that we can learn.

Fiona Robertson:

I think that the transition from being a technical expert to being a people leader is one that is very rarely supported sufficiently, so I think that's a particular transition that we should all be paying far more attention to. I think then further up, when you become a leader of leaders, that's another really critical transition that needs some support.

Fiona Robertson:

And then when you become a leader of division or enterprise, that again. Each of these is a different level of work and understanding what that means and how to shift from one level of work to another is absolutely critical for a leader. And I don't know that you'd get that without some form of genuine leadership development.

Fiona Robertson:

The other thing I would always recommend is I think there's something to be said for group learning that's still a very valid way for people to learn, but I think some individualised application of that learning. So, the kinds of programs I run have group sessions, but then some one-on-one coaching for each participant to make sure that they've understood a concept, that they can apply it to their particular situation.

Fiona Robertson:

So, a degree of tailoring is really critical. So, yeah. I mean, I don't think anyone can ever have enough leadership development. I'm probably a little biased in that.

Ainslie Cunningham:

So, for organisations who, I guess, would like to engage in your types of services, Fiona, and get some help on some of these workshops, where can they find your details? Where can they go?

Fiona Robertson:

Sure. So, I have a website, fionarobertson.com. I'm very active on LinkedIn, so I have my profile up there and lots of videos and articles, and you can download the first chapter of my book. You can obviously buy my book from my website. So those are probably the easiest ways.

Fiona Robertson:

And I absolutely welcome contact. I'm a complete culture and leadership tragic. So I always welcome conversations with leaders whether things are going well or not going well and if I can help, I'd be absolutely delighted to do that.

Deb Anderson:

Do you have a copy of your book there, Fiona, you can hold up?

Fiona Robertson:

I do. I just happen to have. Yeah, this is it. It's called The Rules of Belonging and it's all about organisational culture. As I said, culture is not easy, but I think it is simpler than a lot of us have been led to believe.

Fiona Robertson:

And I think until you really understand what it is and have some kind of shared language, then it's very hard to have a sensible conversation about it and it's particularly hard to do anything about changing it.

Ainslie Cunningham:

And before we wrap up today, Fiona, are there any top tips you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Fiona Robertson:

I think I'll just reiterate some of the things I've already said. You have to notice before you can choose. So, if you're looking to figure out what your organisational culture is and change it to something else, first, go to the trouble of figuring out what are the rules of belonging. So ask yourself, "What does it take to belong in my team?

Fiona Robertson:

What does it take to belong in my organisation?" And once you've answered that question, ask yourself, "Are these behaviours the ones we want to see more of to execute our strategy or not?" And if the answer is not, then figure out what you do want to see more of and make sure that people earn belonging by doing the new rather than the old.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Fantastic. Really great tips. Thanks again, Fiona, for joining us today.

Deb Anderson:

Thank you for your time today, Fiona.

Fiona Robertson:

You're welcome. It's been a pleasure.

Ainslie Cunningham:

Thanks.

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.