

The Leadership Diet with Helen Souness

Pod: Pod here today. I'm joined by Helen Souness, who is the chief executive officer for our RMIT online, RMIT being one of Australia's oldest and most successful universities. She is an experienced leader in the global digital marketplace sector. Having worked for such great brands as seek.com and Envato, Etsy and now, or RMIT. We discussed what it's like to become a CEO for the first time and how her experience has helped her to scale leadership teams in different organizations around different countries.

We talk about why psychological safety is important, not so much to build up trust in teams, although it I've seen it does that, but to allow you as a leader to receive feedback and to allow you as a leader, to understand the impact that you are having on your team and then day four, how do you lead that into a constructive conversation for everybody?

We discuss how someone who is so big into relationship building, how they are managing COVID and the various different ways she's using technology to scale relationship in a time where people are really missing the social contact of being together in the same office. And we also discuss what I call male pale and stale leadership, i.e., all command and control style, or why that has given way to skills such as listening, learning, being fully transparent, which often are skills that are often in abundance within female leaders, and how this opens it door to servant leadership and indeed in her case, extraordinary innovation.

In our introduction, people will have heard me introduce you, but let's talk about RMIT, the university, you know, it's one of the quite achievers in the Australian educational landscape, you know, set up in 1887 as a working man's college, became a university in 1992 through a whole series of mergers and acquisitions.

And now has campuses in Victoria. Barcelona and various relationships across Asia Honda thousand students, 11,000 staff, 41% international students. Wow. That's a success story on itself. And then you joined three years ago to head up the online education part of our MIT. Tell us about that part of the organization and what you're doing there.

Helen: Yeah, look, it was an amazing opportunity because our MIT does have the DNA that I believed we needed to really attack in Ernest the need for updating of skills for lifelong learners, as we, as we call out how students. So the adult of the working adults who. No longer, you know, you get a degree and you're set for life on your education.

Things are changing too fast. Technology is changing too fast, so we need to upgrade our skills constantly throughout our careers. And I really felt there was a lot to be done in that



space, especially when I actually, as part of the interview process started taking online courses and thought naughty.

They have not brought the best of digital skills to education yet when you look at the user experience. So I became very excited about it. And I thought then, and that certainly proves the case that our, my team was a university to do it with because it had that, I mean, it was formed by the working association to meet the needs of the city.

And it's been in the DNA ever since. I mean, it's, it's Royal Melbourne Institute of technology given the oil because of its research on a bomb technology in the second world war with industry. Yeah. That's, that's, it's very deep in the DNA. So we were tapping into something that was there and very strong in the brand already, but then we've really brought industry and to the online education experience really brought the best of digital skills.

To building that experience with the wonderful educators of our MIT. And yeah, it's been a very fun mission for the last few years.

Pod: Now you said a few things I want to double down on the straightaway is you use the word user experience and given your background, which bill covered, I'm sure over the next half an hour or so user experience has been a large part of the years you focused on.

Can you tell me a bit more about education sector and then the digital user experience and how you've been able to navigate that and maybe even transform that over the last number of years.

Helen: Yeah, it's a, it's a fascinating one because you know, she and I, as a digital person for 15, 20 years in digital experiences, is that users all that you test everything you do and you, you AB test, ideally you see, you know, we do controls and you understand exactly how you improve your experience incrementally and then big leaps of testing.

That's a very different. Attitude for an educator whose view as the student must do the work to learn. And it's proven in the research that a student must engage in and do certain things to get a learning outcome that the teacher is not responsible for that two worlds collide in a very interesting way around.

You know, user testing and so on, but I think we are finding a really, a great course to navigate there. Yes, absolutely. A student needs to make the effort to actually acquire knowledge and skill new skills, but. We can make everything around that experience and that effort as easy as possible. So this is what we really try to bring to, to education.

It's not all on the student. We make it as frictionless as possible for them to acquire those skills and have all the support. So very human support. It's not a mood. It's not a go learn on your own. We have success coaches and teaches all the way along in all of our short courses and. Postgraduate programs and, and yeah, bringing the best of those two skill sets together has been one of the biggest challenges of my career, but also one of the most satisfying,

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because they're both needed, you know, you need to make it as easy as possible as supported as possible, but yes, the student also, you know, we need to assess that student and make sure they've made the effort to acquire that new skill.

So it's a fascinating mix

Pod: I remember when I first started doing online courses and you mentioned the word move to note, the notion of the summer stuff put online and a lot of it for free originally. And it was so exciting, but I started my own experience was you get excited in the first two or three sessions, and then the tension level just drops off and drops off.

And I've no idea how many courses I've started and not finished yet. What why you're talking about is as a human behavior teacher relationship experience, that is equally important to the digital experience to make these learning viable. Is that right?

Helen: Yeah, absolutely. And we had a hypothesis at the beginning that even in our short, you know, very industry skill focused courses, we needed a start date and an end date, and we needed people to support that learner and engaged in social learning aspects between student and teacher and between students themselves.

And yes, MOOCs get single digit completion rates where. Getting well, the majority of our students in every course through and, you know, so it had in best practice now. So, you know, the hypothesis is proven, correct that actually you need some support. You need to belong to a cohort to, to really feel committed to this learning experience.

Cause there's moments where it gets hard, especially for working adults who often have kids full time jobs, deadlines, and work. It's a really challenging process for them, but. Know, we're getting a lot of them through most of them. Sorry. I

Pod: love what you said there you've, you've, you've stated close to the DNA of the original university, which was to serve the needs of the city or the people in the city, either working people.

And what you just said there is, is, you know, when you're really busy mom or dad who doing some education in their own time, they've got to feel part of something. Otherwise the temptation just to drift is just far too big and, and the competing commitments are far too huge.

Helen: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, we have the, you know, the perennial learners that just, that is their, that is their hobby people that get through.

But most of us, we need, you know, good planning. Some of our success coaching is all about how are you going to find the time let's look at your week? Where are the slots? How do we commit all of this as part of helping learners succeed?

Pod: So the education sector in Australia is, is I think is in our second or third largest export.



Marketing for the country. So our reading port and sector, how has the online division of our MIT gone over the last three years since you came in and took it over?

Helen: I'll look, it it's been an amazing ride in my team. We've tripled our revenue and more than tripled our enrollments. We've created some new portfolios.

So the short courses was really in an Australian first to build short courses with industry. A lot of private sector was really active. Of course, Sierra and university were the ones. Taking that market, you know, Versity's were a little slower into that space and that's where we've, I guess, innovated over the last few years, it's been an amazing ride, came in with a, what was it?

A ragtag team of 20. Gotcha.

Pod: Okay. That's a big growth.

Helen: I really, from the best digital companies, as well as the best universities, so real, you know, trying to in everything we do bring together the best of education, the best of digital.

Pod: Sounds like you make an education sexy again.

Helen: That would be great.

Pod: I have no doubt about that.

Let's jump to your role as CEO because when you and I were chatting before this call, a few days ago, one of my realizations was, this is your first time. As the complete CEO, you've had a lot of leadership roles, which we go through in a minute. But as your first time in the CEO role, what's the, what was the transition like for you stepping into this and knowing that you were in charge of growth and you're in charge of growth full stop.

This is the buck stops with you. Yes.

Helen: Yeah, look, I I've loved it. And I've been incredibly lucky to have amazing support from my board, which I think is incredibly important to have great teamwork between CEO and board to make it work. In fact, You know, my chair is the vice chancellor of the university. He comes from tic in the U S a lot of his career, as well as education roles.

So he understands taking risks and it's been just an incredible partnership with him as my, I guess, boss and with the whole board. Definitely the buck stops with me and we have taken a lot of risks. I mean, you don't have accelerated growth without taking risks, taking bits that you don't know pay. But I think the fact that my board has always come on that journey being prepared to go.

Yep. Great. We learned something from that, the less successful prizes and. You know, really celebrate our wins with us has made that just an easy transition actually. I mean, it's sure

there's a pressure to owning the numbers, but there's also an incredible buzz too. I mean, the numbers and making a lot of the calls and being empowered to do so.

That's what I've absolutely loved about it. So yeah. Lucky, lucky, easy transition in many ways.

Pod: Bye. Well done you and the board for, for taking the risk, but I'm, I'm really intrigued by a sector that. You know, in many sense that would be considered to be a conservative sector and sense of education's been around for a long time.

And here you are going to the board taking risks. Can you walk us through, what is the conversation or the thinking passion or the preparation for you as a CEO, going into the board with here's what we want to do. Here's a risk that we're taking. Here's what we don't know. Can you back us up? What's that like for you?

Helen: I guess in so many decisions that there is absolute unknowns on a university, doing some of the things we've done for sure. And even in the university products, the accredited postgraduate products, we've created products as I call them so many educators, don't like that word, postgraduate programs that are the Fest in the world.

So we've taken risks even there, you know, a post-graduate. Caucasian in product management and other future of work type roles that have never been done before, will they work? And there's all those data and not just data. Look at tail light in other sectors to look at, as we call them in the private sector.

In the short courses space. Yes, we were taking a risk for us university to credential, but. The private sector was getting, you know, \$80 million of funding per company to do this sort of course, and getting amazing traction and usage. So I think much of what you're doing has never been done. There is taillights.

There's the skills shortage data in the market. There was a burning need so long as you then do good work to produce a good quality product that is going to be fit for purpose and get the students through to the learning outcome. They would calculate the dress, I guess, is what I'm saying. There was always some data, as well as the unknowns.

I

Pod: read a quote from bill Gates in an interview or a post when I was actually blog, he wrote a few weeks ago, he said the two most important questions in his career that he regularly asked himself who else has done this or solve this problem before elsewhere. And how do I learn from them? So I'm guessing what you're saying is the taillights is, is that you say you'd like it as is the evidence left behind from someone else solving a silver similar problem.

That's where.

Helen: Yeah, absolutely. I think some of my best career advice was steal with pride, with ideas. I think lots of, lots of innovators are actually curated ideas, not originators of ideas. I, I have no pride on that fact.

Pod: I mean then from the mindset of the leader, like if I think about the notion of curating ideas elsewhere, it goes to a sense of.

I then therefore can't have all the ideas like this. There's a lack of ego in that sense. He could talk some more about that in terms of how you've either evolved that prior to V or I was never there maybe to begin with.

Helen: Yeah, look, I think that's never been a problem for me thinking I have all the ideas.

I've had a career of making a lot of special moves, you know? More marketing product strategy and the benefit of that. I I've loved picking up different skills and different functional areas, but the other benefit is you actually never become a machine. I have no reliance on expertise. I've moved industries.

I'm constantly in learning mode and maybe that's a freedom because. I, I don't mean to hold on to expertise. It's about listening. It's about talking to the experts for me and bringing people together around ideas and, and opportunities. Seeing white space in markets and, and grabbing it doesn't matter the market to me.

Um, it's about, you know, listening, testing, driving into white space and market. So. Yeah, I have the benefit of no

Pod: you have given us though, is a absolute, beautiful insight into the mind of an innovator, which is to start with a hypothesis, look for why space in the market. Then we'll go to use your phrase, find the taillights from other markets or other people. Start experimenting learn quick. And where you go that that's that's.

If I break it down to what you said, that's, that's the sort of expertise in itself. And then you've you brought in, uh, a skill set of listening and learning alongside them.

Helen: Yeah. Yeah, that, that would be the, well, that would be the expertise. You know, I have to get us, however, I made such dramatic changes of industry.

And I might, to me, what I do is always the same, which is what, which is spot talented people. They're talented in, give them free. And in that, bring them together, galvanize them around a higher purpose. That's what I do. I watch the numbers constantly while we do that, you know, I that's, that's my skill set.

It actually doesn't change by industry or the content.

Pod: It sounds like that's the core content of a future course. RMI MIT



Helen: leading through disruption. Yeah, I hate these negative words we use for the world we live in because it's disruption, but it's massive opportunity rates. So it's all about mindset, isn't it? Yes. So

Pod: let's jump to something you, you touched a few seconds ago on this, the role of CEO and the chair and the relationship.

Now you're an interesting position that you are a CEO reporting to a board and a chair. You ought to sit on a board and have C and I have sat on other boards and CEOs reporting to you. I'm interested in that. How does this two sides of the question? How does the CEO really helped to build the relationship between them and the board and likewise, the opposite.

How does the board help the CEO so that therefore the both levels of leadership are working together.

Helen: You know, at its best. And I'm, I'm incredibly lucky because my board that I said own is also an incredibly collaborative, supportive space between CEO and board. It feels like very much a team working on problems together. And that's how my board I report to feels like. So I'm in a very lucky place. I know it's not always the environment that you find yourself in, in a board.

How have we created that? I think full transparency, radical transparency about numbers. And, you know, a board meeting is not a performance to me. It's a problem-solving session in both in both of these environments, I'm working in different roles. And you know, when it's that, of course it has a governance aspect and, uh, you know, Holding to account aspect.

Of course, that's, that's part of your legal responsibility as a director and my responsibility as a CEO to, you know, report back and show the progress against goals. And so on, of course, there's that formal piece, but much more in the atmosphere and in the working relationships is to play to everyone's strengths and.

Uh, ask for input on problems, you know, and to hide problems, not hide that problems. And I think that sort of transparency and the environment in the boardroom really helps, you know, us be all conscious of what, what are the knowns, what are the unknowns and where are we taking risks versus, you know, and, and how much are we prepared to risk?

So I find that, and, and the second part of your question as to the difference in the roles, Aye. I think in a sense that it's a collaboration as similar roles in your all great minds in a room, trying to try to crack them. But what I find as a board member versus a person that drives the business every day is the leavers are big, but you don't pull them very often.

So in some senses, You know, every day as a CEO, as a running, anyone running an operation, you're tweaking, you're, you're, you're adjusting constantly. Right. And, and there's a thousand things you're doing. Whereas I think as a board member, there's only a few things you do, but they're very big decisions, you know, it's a yes, no, on a big

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investment or it's an, all the thinking and decision making that goes into that, or, uh, You know, when to raise money or, you know, they're big, they're big lasers.

And so I think what I. What I feel the difference is is, is you have to be very careful on when you pull those leaders. You know, it's not, it's not about just having an opinion in that room. It's really, really carefully considering all the elements and all the possible consequences of moving a lever and being very conscious that you shouldn't move down for the sake of it.

That it's largely down to the management team to make all the little tweaks. And, and if you're pulling a lever, you really need to think about it carefully and consider all the options and perhaps not be. It's a slower thought process, I suppose, go slow to go.

Pod: coming to mind. As you were describing that in terms of how, how does the director stay abreast of everything they need to stay abreast of, but subtly, subtly encouraged or nudge as opposed to, as you said, pull big Libras on a regular basis. So again, it goes to a very mindful relationship in terms of the more transparent you can be together.

The less leverage you have to pull on, on, on regular basis. Yes.

Helen: Yeah. Was going on to my first board. It was a not-for-profit for many years. I was at seek and I consulted one of our board members at seek. And he he's a very wise, very experienced board member. He's written and government's books put it there.

And he's said it's as important when you don't speak as when you speak. And I think that was, you know, like sort of hit me like a clunk of yes. It's, it's not a performance. It's, it's really adding value when you open your mouth and maybe it won't add value. You don't need to pick up every point. Yeah. I think it's a very mindful process actually.

Pod: That's there's a lot of wisdom in that comment. You don't have to speak every time. Yeah. Right. Right. I love that. We hope you're enjoying this episode of the leadership diet. Feel free to hit the subscribe button on whatever podcast player you are listening to this on reviews on iTunes and Spotify are greatly appreciated.

I want to jump to leadership teams. I know that M you you've already said to us, but our MIT, the organization has grown enormously in three years of being there. And in a previous role that you were in as the country head for inverter and another digital marketplace business, you also developed and scaled a leadership team there.

Can you talk us through the way you think about teams and the way you think about scaling teams and the experience you've had in that space?

Helen: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, what a privilege, both of those roles invited. It was actually, it was global. It was the market places globally, and those times really didn't have the executive place.



So it was very much just the hitting massive scale up at, in Barstow. And there wasn't, you know, there wasn't even a marketing team or product in yet, so really was able to design and then build. And hire most of the team and my T only one person was already there. It is now my executive seven. So it was go.

So it's an amazing privilege and quite a, I suppose, responsibility for the coaching you have in the future. I always think the people you hire today, company, you have in three years time, you know, it is an incredibly important decision and your leaders of course at the time and the pace for everything.

So. Yeah, I guess one of my lessons on it do it very, very carefully. I mean, I took my time and I really put people through a lot of paces when I'm hiring senior roles, you know, case studies and meeting a lot of people and so on. So just incredibly important decisions, looking also at the mix of the team.

So that's the beauty of doing it, you know, over a year, say. Building most of them exerting. Yep. You really can. And of course, when you replace people later, as, as, as you have smaller gaps, really looking at the mix across the team and that there is the black hat and the yellow and so on, and all the ways that you diversify thinking in that team and then galvanizing that team together, I think that is actually the hardest bit finding I find hiring.

Talented people are really rewarding process. I think pulling those talents together and making sure it's a team is the most challenging thing about running the exec team and really being able to invest in that time together, you know, go away for a couple of days together. And some of those things are the other thing I would say has always paid off, you know, Relationship trust, really knowing each other and being able to call each other robustly and then call me as well on disagreements or, or behaviors is the most powerful kind of practices I've heard.

Pod: So does this, these three things are out. I would like just to go back and double dip on, because I think there's some inherent wisdom there that sits beneath it. The notion of. You said, I put people through a paces and case studies, et cetera. Now, if you're hiring someone for an exec team, they're already are talented.

They already are technically strong. Otherwise they wouldn't even be in your interview room. So what are you looking for when you're doing something like a case study? Is it that the way they think is the way they approach? Is it, is there something you're looking for that may be less obvious to the person doing the case study?

Helen: Look, yes, CV's are always strong right, when you're looking at senior roles, but capability in Executive is often less so, in my experience.

Let's say it's a tech director, you're a CTO.



A lot of strong CVS in technical skills. I'm not even the person to test technical skills, but I am testing the Exec skills. So how well can you translate your technology strategy into a company strategy.

How can you participate as a decision making body in Exec?

How much did you understand your user needs when you were building that technology that I actually think is often not apparent in CV's, been hard to get an interviews, and that is the stuff that makes a great executive.

Their ability to communicate okay.

Their strategy and link it to the company goals and mission. Their ability to communicate full stop their self-awareness on mistakes they've made. So it's never a case. So of course it's never about being right. Yes. But the horsepower in the process of getting to the answer and being self-awareness and exploration.

Of their decision-making process and getting there that is really worth testing because that's an, a good exec or a good functional person.

Pod: I always have, we both seen great functional leaders promote an exec team, and then they flounder because they, they, they just keep doing their functional role and then that's all they know how to do or even want to do sometimes.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think you said if you wanted to go was taking time to go away and really get to know each other. Now there's, there's always commentary about that notion of spending time to get as religious team and getting to know each other. What are some of the benefits you found over your experience of scaling different types of teams?

Because you've, you've invested that time in getting to know each other.

Helen: You know, one of the, one of the fundamental things for high performance to me, and I know proven in research, I'm sure you have plenty is, you know, a feedback culture, for example. I think great feedback and really robust feedback requires trust to be in place and psychological safety to be in place first, before you can hear it.

And before you're brave enough to give it in any direction, you know, up or down. So I think that the key thing is that you build relationship and that, that builds knowledge of each other and, you know, awareness of each other's. Hot buttons and so on, which helps you, you know, work well together. But fundamentally it's about building trust so bad.

You are in a safe enough place with each other to be able to be really robust. And if that trust isn't in place, I think, I think you're pussyfooting about, um, the heart issue. So on the, they always say no, and you know, I'm just going to have to bulldoze them or go around them. No, we need a conversation around why you saying no?

And you know, How do we make this work better, be more positive engagement? You know, whatever the situation is, you need that trust and look, you know, I love my food and wine and, and I think you're sharing these things. Is part of being human and, and, you know, enjoying life together is a really wonderful way to just get out of the transactional and into the relationship that is so important to making teams work and fly.

Pod: Somebody has said up front that people might have skipped over. You said psychological trust being placed. For me to receive feedback and for us to be brave enough to give it, but you start over to receive feedback. Most people want to talk about feedback. Oh yeah. I need to get courageous on how to give it.

And they underestimate how hard it is to receive it. And yet that's where you started.

Helen: Yes. Now I've got an incredible chief student experience. Officer has been a coach and she has a great technique where we all sit around in a circle and. Gifts, one of the people feedback and I'm actually the worst. It takes, especially positive.

I just find that excruciating sitting there and hearing good things I've done. I just, I just want to dive in a hole. So yeah, I've learned that about myself through that teammate. It's really hard to receive, especially positive.

Pod: So G given the success, you've had our last three years, it sounds like you're getting lots of excruciatingly positive feedback,

Helen: made lots of mistakes, too.

Pod: I'm interested in someone who is so relationship oriented and as long as I've known you, that's certainly one of your over. Traits is that you're, you're a huge believer in relationship building. What does it mean like as a CEO working during COVID, where you don't have face-to-face and you, you are relying on video based technology relationships.

And of course, as I said, our fund Melbourne being. And an elongated locked down process. What's that been like for you? And I suppose there's two aspects of the question. One is the CEO in terms of the role of CEO and how you keep the organization together. And then two, as the person that's Helen, who was a very relationship oriented person.

Helen: Yeah. Well, Yeah, everyone knows. It's, it's really challenging to keep the social connection in the same way that you can. I just, the thing I missed, absolutely the most is walking the floor. As I used to at least twice a day, I had gaps in my diary to just walk the floors and chat with whoever was around and set.

You know, you can read faces, you can read body language, you can see a team's looking tense with each other. That I can't, I have not found a way for a place. I'm doing a million things, everything from a weekly video where, you know, sometimes yeah, it's a business update, but sometimes actually I've done an update on, you know, resilience and what I do to stay mentally strong through.



This time or it's about my reconciliation journey with indigenous Australia, whatever the topic, just lots of communication. That way we have a coffee related system that we get randomly matched on Slack with people across the business for a cup of coffee. We do that anyway, but we've really upset and I've created a CEO roulette where I just bring six people from across the business and we just chat about what's worrying us.

What's exciting us, whatever. And these. Just trying a million things basically to keep that informal relationship happening and the cross team, what I've found, I don't know about you, but teams themselves have actually, in some cases got stronger. They're doing daily stand ups. They're, they're looking after each other.

Their communication is constant and strong, but the cross team collaboration is a nightmare because you don't necessarily meet all the time. And so those spontaneous connections are getting weaker and weaker. And so I'm just doing a million things, but I have not been able to replace the walk, the floor.

I just haven't. And I miss it. Yes,

Pod: I bet. I bet. And I like, I'm hearing the same thing from many organizations and need some of the ones that are working in myself. The intact teams have found many different and sometimes hilariously innovative ways of staying, staying in touch. And I suspect that'll become part of their.

Normal way going forward, because it's been so fun on many, many levels, but the cross functional teams that would just meet in the corridors or in, in a whole of company meeting or in the canteen or coffee shop or whatever, that's, that's gone at the moment because there was no reason to meet. And so, yes, there's I saw somebody that he said to me, the sense of who am I, part of, I'm definitely part of my own team.

I'm definitely proud of this big brand. Cause I know I am, but who else is in the brand assignment team? I don't know any more. Cause I haven't seen them in six months and that's the product is missing.

Helen: Yeah. Yeah. And for newbies and that's just another whole conversation that we've had 20 new starters and they've never, they didn't even interview in the office.

They really don't know what our culture is. So trying to give them a flavor of that. I've done, you know, old photo montages of parties we've had because we've always had a great party. Culture celebrate success can culture. And, you know, we've actually gone back to some of those things. I mean, you know, just to or talked about the things that were missing from the office or recently, which caused a gorgeous conversation with, you know, the goofy things that actually kinda mess economists and so on.

Just trying to give me a visa. The fact we don't take ourselves too seriously. There is there Israel connection and a lot of fun being had and interim be done. It

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Pod: will be heading again again. Absolutely.

Can I share the topic completely. You have had an, any career in the digital world and particularly in marketplaces in digital worlds, he worked with some of the biggest brands seek who were on the largest Korean marketplace companies in the world. And certainly in, in Australia, um, and Vata, we mentioned a few minutes ago in terms of digital graphic design, and then those kinds of areas at sea, of course, the international crafts organization and our MIT.

I'm interested in two things I'm interested in. Your own leadership and how that has evolved over those roles as he transitioned into bigger and bigger roles. And I'm interested in how does someone be very successful in the digital world consistently across different brands and different companies like you have.

So maybe let's start with the leadership evolution for me. Mm mm.

Helen: No, it's always so very, very the actual progression. I mean, it's had its periods of acceleration. I think going from marketing to inviter my first GM role in massive growth and a huge amount to be done, you know, building a team from scratch while, you know, sort of, we used to joke LaMer laying the tracks while the high speed trains running was certainly a period of massive acceleration and handling, uh, a board and so on.

And so the first time. Yeah. In many ways it's felt a natural progression. So I'm not sure what to say. I think, you know, you accumulate skills over the years. And I did a lot of lateral moves. I did product strategy marketing, even in marketing, at seek. I was doing a lot of extension projects to prepare for GM.

So I, I ran product there for while I moved to them to an agile methodology, which required working deeply with the tech team. So I was already. You know, the best career advice I ever got was if you do the job you want, if you want to be a generalist manager and you're in marketing, start doing other projects.

And that's exactly what I did. And so in many ways I was already, I had quite a few of the muscles, I suppose, having moved around a lot, I'd done strategy, et cetera, pulling them all together at speed. Was, you know, certainly a, a challenging time. And probably the hardest thing was, was getting enough relationships in place with that much speed and so much to be done.

That was probably, that was the hardest thing because I do, I always tend to have with bosses. Everyone around me, you know, my best operating style is a strong relationship to then be able to push things pretty hard. Cause I do push things pretty hard. I've always worked in high growth, so that requires a lot of forward momentum and you may be able to come with you and you can't be busy footing around.

So. Yeah, that's PR that's probably the most challenging periods, but in many ways, a natural transition to, you know, it's not as hard

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Pod: as it sounds. Well, I think of what you said, Helen. You're, you're, you're on a consistent learning path. You, you enjoy learning. So you, you, you also keep a very open mind and, and, and you seek either projects or roles or areas to lean into and learn from.

Have you, have you changed any part of your. Thinking patterns or leadership patterns over time, as you have learned new roles or moved into bigger roles. Hmm.

Helen: Oh, mature and needing to be in self-management. I mean, I think that is the biggest journey. You know, if you say 10 years old, what are the muscles that have developed itself moderation, observing myself, recognizing this isn't working.

Adjust rather than continuing to use web style, for example, you know, so for example, I'm a passionate person which serves me well, you know, I'm, I'm really committed to my end users, to my team. That's a really strong and good muscle, but it's a dangerous muscle in some debates because it gets to being a bulldozer and a conversation to being too.

Or at least appearing emotional in a conversation, which might not serve me in some environments. And so, so moderating, knowing this is a strength, passion can be, you know, in a team meeting, it can be as passionate as I like that in a boardroom, not so much. You know, it looks smarter. I let's, let's make sure I'm giving space to the whole room, et cetera.

So I think myself moderation has been my biggest journey and it's constantly still my work. Yeah.

Pod: Have you processed that you now use regularly to either proactively remind yourself to amplify or to quieten down because of the environment I'm going in. I'm just trying to wonder how do you moderate yourself compared to when you didn't.

Yeah. It's

Helen: it's, it's, it's hard to know, isn't it? Cause you build over time, but I think, I think slow down. I think I, I slow it down. I stopped speaking, you know, and as soon as you realize this, there's a talking and I must admit I'm not so disciplined about that. In my working team. So, you know, there's a lot of talking over each other at times we're working on it.

But certainly if I'm in a high stakes, you know, board or meeting with some of the heads of college at the uni, some of my really high stakes industry partners, and there is. Talking, you know, agitated talking or talking over happening, I've learned to stop, you know, that's that is, that should not be happening.

Right. Slow it down and need to change the pace. And I need to change my pace. Even speaking slower. Yeah. Some of those, yeah. Self-management techniques. I think those are the main ones

Pod: I probably use. I think there are great examples. And certainly that, that board member that you took advice from when you were at seek about moving into your first board role



and his, his, his, I think it was a, his, you said, um, gave you advice in terms of you don't always have to speak.

That's a real wisdom there, and I've certainly noticed over the years as leaders get more experienced. And they move into senior roles. They get far better at picking. And when, when do I add value or when do I let, just let it go. Or as you said, when do I slow down the conversation? Which means I've got to slow down my speaking, which then helps the whole conversation slow down.

And it's a really powerful technique, but it requires awareness to begin with. And then the act of process of moderation as you're doing. Yeah. We've been developing those, uh, to great effect over the last number of years.

Helen: Always a journey, but I'm working on it

Pod: maybe before we come to a conclusion soon, I wanted to jump into what might be a big topic.

I must have surely see where we go to buy notice one this year that you're very passionate about, and that is let's use the term gender politics for that, for the want of a better term. And I'm sure I'm sure it is a fry better terms than that one. But I noticed an article that our MIT put out reset. It was last week.

The advice to women to lean in, be more confident. It doesn't help and the data shows it. And it's a really interesting article that effectively says, you know, women who express a higher, strong sense of achievement, motivation. I a yes, we can get X done. Don't necessarily get the same rates of promotion as, as men might do.

Tell us more about that and then tell us some of the views you have in this area. Cause I know it's something you think a lot about.

Helen: Yeah. Look, it's a dangerous one. I, I, I loved it. Oh my God. Yes. Like, you know, is it about women changing or is it about unconscious bias? You know, in my early career I was told I'd never make an exec because I was far to expressive.

Pod: I know

Helen: what they say. I know I've got a slightly quirky personality. I didn't look like this boys at the exec table at the time, you know, in my career, there was often no women in the, in the leadership team, but is it about, is it always about you changing your personality or is it about recognizing the strengths of diversity and.

Understanding that it doesn't necessarily look like you and truly deep work on unconscious bias. Is it, I mean, everyone needs it. I need it for, for the areas I'm blind to culturally. And I thought it was very interesting research on that front. That. We need to be really careful. Of course, I'm a big believer in feedback culture, and I've needed a bunch of feedback, including



perhaps to tone down my quirks in some environments, not to say that there isn't very valid feedback in most feedback.

But do women need to change or do our environments need to open up to different and diverse styles? And there's amazing power to that. Diversity, you know, the thrusting sort of command and control old style management is actually a thing of the past. And women were often prejudiced against for being maybe soft or empathy or, or bringing their teams with them.

You know, the research has caught up with us on this actually command and control is not the most powerful servant leadership is the most effective leadership style that looks different to thrusting, you know, commanding control to style. And guess what? Women are really good at it. They have a natural desire to serve people and natural empathy.

And so. It's such important work and, and one that I, I think we're all on a journey on culturally with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. It's not just about gender. We miss out on a huge number of talented people and the best they can give. If we don't understand that unconscious bias and yeah, it's alive and well today it's alive

Pod: today, but it's, it's, I think it's a really timely article that came out from our MIT and this, given that over the weekend, just in our denim was reelected back into New Zealand.

And she certainly is someone who would suggest by her own words that she doesn't want to portray a. Trusting type leadership style. And in fact, the word kindness is a huge part of her own way of thinking. And certainly she has a one product appears to be a landslide in New Zealand. And if you look at the way she led join some big crisis, not just COVID, but also in the cross church massacre, extraordinary sense of empathy and strongly sense of listening to understand.

And that's been validated by the New Zealand people by looks of it in terms of the recent election.

Helen: Yeah, and it's not WIC, whereas blunts that might've been perceived, you know, to show emotion too. It's actually strong and look how strong she was on COVID. She locked down that country that hardest in the world.

I think, you know, old fashioned judgments of some of these strengths need to change. And I think, you know, with such a polarized person that brings people together and galvanizes a nation at a time where you could have had a polarizing. You know, step in the wrong direction, shootings like that and, and hate crimes.

You know what an extraordinary

example,

Pod: ma'am, I'm always a bit reluctant to use politics as, as a, as a way to look for from leadership lessons, because it's such a different environment to the one that you and I would normally operate in, but certainly you can see a whole lot of different versions of leadership applying today in terms of how countries and, and different leaders are using COVID or, or.

Crimes like massive presence sets on how leadership is being portrayed. I would agree with you. Two sentence version seems to be very positive and very successful in terms of, of, of a good outcome for everybody. And in that regard, it actually underlines going back to the very first conversation we had today.

And underlined rarely the lateral moves you've made has forced you to listen well and learn well from other people and galvanize people around. Here's the problem we're trying to solve. And how do we do that together? And how do we learn from each other as the starting point that goes back down to a lack of ego and the thrusting male leadership in his historical sense is full of ego.

And I think once your support, your aligning you today is innovation requires a lack of ego and an amplified version of learning and listening.

Helen: Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't say I have no ego. I think to lead into back yourself, you need some to stand on that stage and say, we're going this way, crossing your fingers behind your back, you know, Joan confidence.

But yeah, that balance that balance for sure.

Pod: Brilliant. And then I got two questions to bring our conversation to a close today. The first one that I ask everybody and do the second one I ask everybody is the first one is given all the wisdom you've accumulated. Now in your life, what would you tell the 35 year old version of yourself?

Helen: I would say, don't worry. You will have a child and you will be a CEO panicking about boats,

Pod: I think would apply to a small number of people.

Helen: That's brilliant. Yeah,

that would give me. Is don't hold on too tight. My husband does rock climbing and says, there's literally a phenomenon where you hold too tight to the rock and it fatigues your hands. And I think it is the most beautiful. And you can drop, you get so fatigued. And I think that is a beautiful analogy for leading and so career goals and everything, but yes, have them.

Dare to know you can do anything, but don't hold on too tight. Just a soft touch is more

Pod: effective. I think. Brilliant. And you may know I'm a huge music fan, so I'm always intriguing to people's views of music and their, what attracts them. What would be your favorite song or favorite band?

Helen: Got the risk of getting a label over my head.

Helen Reddy died a couple of weeks ago, so I've got to say I am warm. I don't, I watched me grow in numbers too big to ignore as I spread my loving arms across. I got to go with that

Pod: one. Well, we'll definitely have that in the show notes. We might even have that in the, uh, as we exit the show today, Helen, it's been a pleasure talking to you again.

Thank you so much for making time. Congrats on the amazing success at our MIT for you and your team. Thanks, Amanda. Appreciate you being here.

Helen: Awesome. Great to speak with you, Patrick.

Pod: Hope you enjoy that conversation with Helen from a coaching perspective, Helen has raised, I think, some great topics to take away and reflect upon the first one is. That struck me at least is the amount of lateral moves she has made in her career. Going from law, into marketing, into product development within the digital sector, into GM roles, across a graphic design industry that she had never been in before into craft design and marketplace.

And now into education. She told us that that taught her to never hold on to expertise. And in fact, her expertise became one of listening, learning and curious. My own career was autistic similar in that I moved across many different sectors, originally working in cardiac surgery, intensive care hospitals and units in London to what I'm doing today.

And I would also agree with her that when you move careers across different industries, you are forced to listen. To learn and to work with curiosity. So I suppose the first question I have for all of us listen today is how do you expand your own sense of curiosity into areas that you've never worked in?

What can you learn from other roles or other jobs or other functions, even in your own organization that you haven't worked in before? What can you take from that? How can that amplify your skills? The second thing I took from our Cole and conversation with Helen today was the whole notion of innovation.

And we quoted a question that bill Gates says is his most important question. I E when solving problems he looks for, who has done this before elsewhere, what can we learn from them? Alan talked about. The fact that she moved careers meant that she had to learn quickly from other places and bring experience from other places with her.

That's why she outlined the notion of starting with a hypothesis in terms of our marketplace hypothesis, looking for trail lines or clues from other people who have solved similar problems elsewhere, sometimes in different sectors and curating those ideas from

elsewhere. Looking for some white space in the market to potentially play in experiment and look for what's the best user experience I can offer.

In this white space in this sector and then experiment and innovate. And the success she's had in many different markets has been consistent over a long period of time. But in this example, she talked about RMI T tripling his revenue in a three-year period and expanding his team from a team of 20 to over 230.

So clearly something is working right. So the question here again is what can I take from elsewhere? What problems am I trying to solve at the moment that potentially somebody in a different sector, different industry, a different city, a different country, a different team has solved before and how can I go to them to figure out what they have done?

Not that I might actually copy exactly what they've done. But I can learn as to how they figured out what to do, and maybe those principles might apply and how I'm trying to solve my problem. So how do I go elsewhere? Indeed. In a previous episode with Dr. Paul Lawrence, he talked about different levels of thinking, and he said that a second order level of thinking means I would always go elsewhere to figure out who has done what, before, how I can learn from them.

And that's a basis of innovation.

Helen: Okay.

Pod: the third thing that she talked about is scaling teams. And she gave us a great example of how, when she's hiring for the executive team, she is less interested in their day functional expertise, because if they wouldn't be in the conversation with her. Without that to begin with, she's far more interested in candy, extrapolate their functional expertise and apply that across the executive team to think like an executive think at an enterprise level.

My experience of working at many executive teams over a 15 year period now is that a lot of executives and a lot of executive teams. Fail to raise their potential because some executives are still operating as a functional technical leader, as opposed to an executive leader. And Helen told us that her success in at least two different organizations in scaling global leadership teams was because you took an inordinate amount of time to make sure that the perspective person she was hiring was able to work at an executive level.

As opposed to just their functional team.

Lastly, can we talk about a servant leadership? She really amplify the notion of diversity and thinking in a diverse way and looking for quirkiness, which means if someone is in your group, Your team, your perspective team, and they don't quite fit in that might be because they are diverse in the way they're thinking or the background that they're bringing all this sense of personal quirkiness.



So how do we expand ourselves to welcome that? To open the doors to diversity and diversity way of thinking, as opposed to automatically, uh, maybe con consciously having a bias against what doesn't look like, what we've always done. Certainly in my own life, I continually strive to try to understand folks who think very differently to me, just so I can understand what I don't understand.

Doesn't mean. I always agree with the points of view, but I'm still trying to learn how people think differently. And then therefore, where does that land? It doesn't always work, but it's certainly a practice worth cultivating. Thank you for listening to another episode of the leadership diet. We hope you enjoyed it.

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So they can hear the insights from our guests as well. Thank you.