

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - SALLY FOLEY-LEWIS (Katie Elliott & Sally Foley-Lewis)

My guest today is productivity and leadership expert, Sally Foley-Lewis. Sally's a speaker and coach who has worked across Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australia. She's the author of two books on leadership in the workplace and was named as one of the 25 LinkedIn Top Voices for Australia for 2018.

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Sally Foley- Lewis, thank you for joining me today, all the way from Australia.

Thanks Katie, it's so cool to be with you . Thank you for having me.

Please tell me a little bit about yourself and the work that you do and how you came to be doing it.

Well, it's funny, I think I've always been in the front of the room. And so my entire life I have either been in the school play or put on little skits as a kid or my mom would drag me out in front of her dinner party guests to do some impersonation of someone and I absolutely loved it. And I think the child within me that got such a great buzz from being in front of the room has been the thread through my entire career, through being a recreation officer in a psychiatric hospital - helping people reengage with their skills for daily living, but using sport and recreation and leisure as a way to do that - through to being a development officer in a community group, being a CEO of a youth organisation, and now I'm a professional speaker. So, you know, being in front of the room and being of value to someone in such a way that they can find their own value and let that shine I think is one of the key things for me.

What a wonderful combination of experiences and skills you must have had. So a recreational officer in a psychiatric ward - did you say that?

Yes, I did say that. People do double-take when I say that, but my very first job out of university was as a recreation officer in a psychiatric hospital.

And so was that engaging with people who were staying there at that point and just finding fun things to do?

I'd like to think it was as loose and as casual as that, but it wasn't. There was five wards altogether. One of them was a locked ward, a secure ward, and so some

elements of what I did in my role were incredibly structured whereas there are other elements in my role where I would just walk down to the local shopping center, the shopping mall, with someone and we would do window shopping, we'd catch a bus together and then walk back together because, hidden in all those layers of doing something as simple as walking to the shops was, "How are you dressed? Let's go for a walk as opposed to catch a taxi. Let's have a look at something and not feel compelled to buy". You know? I mean, we can unpack that for days, but yes, it was an amazing job. It was a challenging job and I absolutely loved it.

Mm. I was in hospital a little while ago after having a lot of mental health problems myself and the high point actually of my time there was there was a lovely lady, who I guess was probably doing a job very similar to the one you're describing, and she used to come and play table tennis with me. That kind of kept me going really. That and the fact that there was a piano there could go and play the piano and people would come and sing with me - the staff and the other people who were staying there at the time would come and sing with me. But I think it's very easy to forget actually those things that are fun and light and not about one's health or, you know, the kind of big important stuff in life - those things matter such a lot in terms of making life worth living. And I've got a real soft spot for table tennis ever since. I'm not very good at it, but I do like to play a bit of bad table tennis from time to time. So I love to think of you doing that. I bet you were fabulous.

There were some days we'd just have so much fun and laughter and I was lucky to have a lot of facilities and infrastructure around me because at the drop of a hat I could say, "You know what, this isn't working. Let's go make some pikelets and a cup of tea". And, you know, there'd be six or seven of us in the kitchen burning pikelets and having a laugh and learning to know, "The first one's always the mistake, you know, let's make another batch, we'll be okay". And just sit around and eat and have a cup of tea and not put so much pressure on having to be a certain way. You know, you say you're not good at table tennis, but you enjoyed it. Yeah. I don't care whether you're good or not. It's, "Are you having fun and are you engaged?" And I think that's the key piece for me.

Thinking about the work that you do now, I know that you are something of an expert on productivity and you've worked with over 10,000 managers and leaders, I believe, helping them with their productivity and their management skills. Can you tell me, who really could do with some more productivity skills, can you think of some things that you've learned along the way that might be quite helpful for people like me to know about?

The model of productivity that I work from is that I break it down into three sort of core areas and so there's People Productivity, so how I work with my people to help

them be more productive. So probably if you were looking for a more traditional view of it, it's my leadership. And then there's my own Personal Productivity, so what is it that helps me be more productive around what I'm doing and that might be looking at my habits, whether I procrastinate and those sorts of elements. And then the third one is the Professional Productivity, and I labelled it that way because I see it as, "How do I do my work and am I doing it in such a way that it's actually having a greater return on investment?" So it could be, "Do I multitask? Do I handle my emails and my meetings?" (the two favourites of everyone in any workplace - emails and meetings!) You know, "How do I handle those and am I being as effective as possible?" And all of these three areas, the people, the personal and the professional, they all intersect like a Venn diagram and they all have an impact on how it is that we are showing up at work and having an impact on each other. So some of the things I think about is if you procrastinate, and we all do, but what we procrastinate on is the thing that we need to understand. So when I procrastinate, what is it that thing does to me that makes me stop and find a million other things to do? And when we understand that it's usually driven by a level of stress. And so what's that stress about? So we need to take some time not making ourselves feel bad because we procrastinated, but actually explore it. Actually sit there and pay attention. So I, well, why is this a stress for me? What is it that I'm missing so that I can understand this a little bit better?

So if someone's procrastinating are there particular ways that you would help them to explore that or to kind of break it down so that they could get past that very uncomfortable feeling? Because we all know it, it's pretty horrible, isn't it, when you know you should be doing something and you're using up an awful lot of energy trying to not think about it.

Absolutely.

Let's say I'm struggling with my tax return and I feel so stressed about it I don't even want to think about it. How would you help someone like me to get past that block and actually feel all right about getting it done?

Well, I'd want to understand what the block's about. So let's have a look at what's stressing you about the actual tax return.

When I used to find tax returns really stressful, it was the feeling that there was just so much stuff and I couldn't get my head round the whole topic. So it'd be this huge thing looming.

Okay.

There's quite a sort of fear of the unknown going on there, I think. It's this nasty feeling that I'm going to put my information in and then I'll have got it wrong and it could also be, "What if I forget something that was supposed to go in?" And also, "What if I can't find something?" So there are a whole load of things to do with my organisation and my understanding of the task that are making me feel really quite stressed, let's say.

Okay. So we would break that tax return down into doing one section at a time and we may even break it down to doing half of one section at a time. And we'd plot that on the calendar and schedule that in and create it so that you read that half section and then you go find what you need just for that half section and then that's all you do that day.

Ah ok.

And I've had a similar thing with someone who had a massive report to do and they were freaking out because they didn't know where to start. And so I said, "What's the title of the report?" And so they said, "It's this". And I said, "Right, type that, now hit save. Now you've started. See how hard that was". You know, and I was being a little bit facetious of course, but I've said to them, you're not going to get to the end without doing a whole lot of steps first. And you actually know that you've just got to remind yourself of that and the other thing that came up in that is the fear of the unknown and you already gave some things to me about explaining what the unknown is. Am I going to get it wrong? What happens if I miss submitting something? Well, chances are that there is a website and a human that you might check or speak with. So we break that down and we challenge the thinking about, "Well, how would we find that information out?" Everything gets broken down and broken down and broken down, because the first stress you talked about was a massive, huge burden. So we have to break that down. Another classic one I actually think is the perfectionist. I just did a very quick research piece recently and the majority of responses I got around, "What's the biggest hindrance to the productivity?" was perfectionism.

Yeah.

And so the problem is that in the moment when we're trying to get the work to be absolutely 100 percent guaranteed, no gaps, watertight, we forgotten what the actual standard was required. We've applied our personal standard, which is an unrealistic standard. And what we need to do is work on reconciling our personal standard to the stated required of that piece of work because perfectionism, means deadlines get blown and so we need to look at where our expectations and

standards lie, plus also the scheduling of how we do our work so that we actually meet the deadline at the standard that we're happy with.

I think the problem often comes because we're not consciously aware in the moment that we're being a perfectionist, we're just driven by whatever it is we think we need to do. When you stand back and look at it and think, "Is it really worth me spending another two hours trying to get this report a tiny bit better? Or would my time be better spent doing this other job that really needs doing?", it's possibly an easier decision, but I know that when I'm kind of going down that rabbit hole of perfectionism, I don't necessarily have lots of insight into what I'm doing. I'm just focused on the task at hand. So I'm wondering if for someone like me who has a tendency towards perfectionism, trying to do work in kind of time-limited blocks, so that I inevitably have to come up for air and then possibly encourage myself to reevaluate whether it really needs that extra couple of hours or not.

Yeah, and none of this stands alone in and of itself. There's a lot of elements that become related to this. So what I would also add to what you're saying reminds me of Covey's 'Urgent vs Important'. What he's pushing for is that we spend more time doing important things like planning so that we don't get dragged into all the urgent stuff that is not always our own urgent. And so if perfectionism is a stumbling block for you, then the first thing I would want you to be doing is a little bit more time planning. And so in that planning you can actually be looking at, "What standard does this have to be? How complete does this need to be? What are they actually expecting from me? And a lot of times, and a lot of work I do with a lot of managers is they're so frustrated because their staff don't know what to do and they're sick of telling them. And I say, "Well, how clear are your expectations?" You've got one lot of staff who are over-exceeding expectations because they've assumed and they don't want to get into trouble and think that's what's required. And then you've got another lot who just scraping by because they are making, again, assumptions. And so the planning piece is really important. Planning can be quite boring for a lot of people and I get that, but even if it's an extra 10 minutes and I literally mean only 10 minutes, it doesn't have to be hours and weeks and days, if it's 10 minutes of planning, asking those questions is actually an engagement booster and a productivity booster in and of itself.

Wonderful. So one of the things that you do is you encourage people to really just take one step and then possibly put things down for a bit or acknowledge that they've taken a step and they've made some progress. So breaking things down into very, very small pieces. And giving themselves a bit of credit each time they do one of those pieces.

Absolutely.

I have a technique I use in my own head which is called The Next Right Step. So when I've got a situation where I feel overwhelmed, let's say with my tax return, I think, "Well, I bet there's one thing that is really easy to do in this situation that I know for sure needs to be done". And it might literally be like opening the website on my computer or it might be getting out my box of receipts. But I'll think, "What's the next right step?" And I find it very often when you focus on the next right step rather than the huge task, they're kind of sequential and once you've done one, you can see what the next one is, but you can't necessarily see them all from where you're starting. Does that sound familiar to you?

Ah, 100 percent resonates with me. And what tends to happen is that when we agree on that, "What is that next right step?" - because you see the achievement in it and I think we are achievement poor in a lot of ways and what I mean by that is we're forever plugged in, switched on and getting instant gratification with bells and whistles and dings and pings and we multitask a lot, so we're doing a lot of little bits of a lot of little things, but we don't actually get to a sense of achievement in and of itself, as often as I think we could. And so that next right step is, "Look at that, the box of receipts. Got it, it's on the table". Okay. Curiosity. "The next right step is take the lid off." All right. Curiosity. "Let me get them in a bit of order..." And see how I'm feeling even better? You can hear it in my voice. It's like, "Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!"

Yeah.

Because we're getting these little bits of achievement by actually setting a really simple, small step and we're achieving it and that just motivates us to keep going. And you don't have to because that wasn't part of the plan. But if you do, that's great.

I think celebrating those little wins makes all the difference, doesn't it? Makes it a lot more fun.

Oh, absolutely.

Time to be nicer to ourselves.

Oh absolutely. My big word for 2019 is self-love, so I'm going to be deep diving into that this year and seeing where on earth that takes me. But yeah, definitely nicer to ourselves.

Thank you. So in each episode, I love to ask our guest for the day, if they can suggest a *Little Challenge* for the listeners at home and I'd love to ask you, Sally, what would your *Little Challenge* be?

Oh, I loved this when you asked me and I instantly had an idea about calendars. Now we all have a calendar of some sort somewhere whether it's in our phone or on our computer or, you know, the old pen and paper version. I think we've forgotten how to make appointments for ourselves. And one of the things that's been mulling around in my head is that we no longer get home from work at 6 o'clock in the evening and sit down and watch the 6 o'clock news or the 7 o'clock news which used to be on, because now it's on 24 hours a day and we can access it anytime we want. But there was this appointment that we had at home and that appointment was to sit down and have dinner and watch the news or whatever the ritual was. And so, because that has tended to go away, we don't have as many appointments with ourselves. I think that that instantaneous, "I'll do it now, do it here, do it there. This is pinging me, this is dinging me" - I think we've forgotten how to make serious appointments with ourselves and that is why our self care and putting ourself first, so that we've actually got a full tank to be of service to others has gone by the wayside a lot. And so I want people to get their calendars out and put something in their calendar every single day that's for themselves. It does not have to be a four hour spa date every single day, which would be incredibly over the top and luxurious and maybe, once in a while, not too bad, but maybe it's five minutes of just sitting on a chair staring out a window and just being mindful for five minutes and it's your five minutes. And it could be doing some gratitude journaling or it could be five minutes of pulling out your favourite recipe book and finding a recipe. It doesn't matter what it is, but every single day, something just for you. And that is scheduled. It's non negotiable. It's for you. And of course obviously longer periods for exercise or or anything like that, but something every day. So bring back that appointment to you. The interesting thing about using your calendar is that it feels kind of counterintuitive, that if you fill your calendar up, you don't have freedom, but the opposite happens. The more you've actually scheduled your day to account for you, the work you need to do, the people you want to be with, the activities you want in your day, and the more they're scheduled in they become guiding posts for you. You'll actually have that freedom because you built it in.

That's so lovely. Thank you. I love the idea of thinking of something joyful for yourself everyday. Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time today, Sally. If people would like to find out more about what you do, I've got a long list of links I can share, but where's the main place they can find you online?

I think LinkedIn or on my website. So Sally Foley Lewis - there's only one of me, strangely enough and probably thank goodness, but SallyFoleyLewis.com or reach out and connect with me on LinkedIn would be lovely.

It's been an absolute joy to talk with you. Thank you so much for all you've shared today.

Thanks, Katie!