



# TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT SESSION

## 2021 FUTURE LEADERS SUMMIT

### OPENING KEYNOTE

**Catherine Rule (Keynote)**

Director General, Community Services Directorate  
ACT Government

**Holly Noble (Host)**

Director, Business Transformation and Education  
Department of Finance  
IPAA ACT Future Leaders Committee Chair

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HOLLY NOBLE: Today's Summit is a special one. It is designed purely on feedback from our Future Leaders Program participants and aims to provide a spotlight on the key themes that you told us mattered most – particularly after a big year. The Future Leaders Committee regularly engages with our alumni and I encourage you to contribute your ideas to make our Future Leaders events and engagement program the best they can be for you.

Without further ado, I'd like to welcome Catherine Rule to deliver her keynote presentation. Catherine is the Director General of the Community Service Directorate in the ACT Government. Prior to joining the ACT Public Service, Catherine held multiple senior executive roles across the Australian Public Service over the last 20 years. She has a Master of Arts, post-graduate qualifications in management psychology, and a Bachelor of Applied Science. Welcome Catherine.

CATHERINE RULE: Hi everybody. Thank you for having me and good morning. And I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet. For me, it's the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are with us here today. Thanks for your introduction, Holly. I think you guys have a fantastic day ahead of you with some very engaging speakers. Most of whom I've worked with over the years and some of whom I continue to work with now. I'm not going to go into much background about me, but I will try and draw on some examples from my career to help you kind of understand or think about some of the issues that you are talking about today.

I've had a bit of a look at the topics that you're covering today, resilience, networks, and leadership. And for me, those are all underpinned by one common element, which is relationships. I thought I'd share with you some of my views about the importance of relationships. Some thoughts, how to build and maintain them, and my experience of what happens when the relationships are not there.

I started my public service career in the late nineties in a tiny organisation then known as the Australian sports drug agency or ASDA, as a drug testing and education organisation for athletes. And at that time was really gearing up to support the Sydney Olympics. But tiny. It was only about 50 full-time staff. It's evolved into something a bit more sophisticated now, but back then it was a pretty great place to work. And the chief executive of the agency was a woman called Natalie Housen.

Natalie's retired now, but she went on to work in defense, Centerlink and actually was a previous occupant of the job that I have been in now for the last three months in the ACT Government. Next week, I'm having lunch with her to pick her brains about some of the challenges I'm seeing in my new role.

The Deputy CEO of ASDA was a man called John Mendoza who went on to become the CEO of the National Mental Health Council. I subsequently worked with John when I was in the Department of Health and he was advocating strongly for more mental health funding. My boss at ASDA was a guy called Kim Terell. Kim's currently the CEO of Australian Hearing, and I worked with him both at Centerlink and in his current role when I was working on the national disability insurance scheme.

One of my teammates, Karen Price is now the deputy CEO of Acorn or the AIDS Council of New South Wales. And I've worked with Karen in my time at both the Departments of Human Services and the Department of Health. My point really is that even from a tiny, little, obscure organisation, all those years ago, the foundations of my network were formed. None of us, least of all me, would've predicted where our careers would head or that we would cross paths in so many obscure contexts so different from where it began. The NDIS, health, social security and community services all feel a very long way from drugs in sport.

Public service is essentially a people based business. I've never worked in a role where I didn't have to work with others. Whether it's stakeholders, service providers, other jurisdictions, managers, leaders, ministers, or even the person in the next cubicle. You have to be able to work with and through other people. Experiences taught me, you are most successful and the best outcomes are achieved when good relationships have been built and can serve as the foundation for action.

Let me give you some examples. During a crisis or emergency, relationships really come to the fore. Of course, COVID's been a great example of that, but I've also seen this in bushfires, floods and other emergency responses. For much of the COVID response, I was in DSS working on the NDIS. And I was very involved in the rollout of vaccinations for people with a disability. This got very political, particularly when supply of vaccines was an issue and the states and the Commonwealth grappled for control. But it also got political at the Commonwealth level with different ministers arguing that their cohort, interest group or electorate should get a higher priority than others.

As a senior public servant in this scenario, the focus has to be on getting things done. And how do you do that? Well through your relationships, of course. I had a good network in health having worked there previously. I also had a good network into the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet who were overseeing the advice to National Cabinet on rollout. I had a good relationship with my minister's office. At times I had to call on all of those relationships to get agreements made, to be able to share information and to calm things down.

And that then enabled to focus on actually getting the best outcomes for people with disability, but also for the broader population. To give you another example, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, I've said many times to lots of people that working on policy around the NDIS has to date been one of the hardest jobs I've ever had. And that's because of the breadth and intensity of the relationships required. The legislation underpinning the NDIS gives a lot of power to states and territories and limited power to the Commonwealth. So the Commonwealth is responsible for the NDIS but actually they can't make any decisions to change any policy settings that are embedded in legislation without the consensus agreement of states and territories.

This plays out by states, regardless of their political persuasion, getting together to agree a position that essentially places all of the financial risk, and it's a significant financial risk, at the feet of the Commonwealth. I get it and now I'm one of those pesky state or territory officials taking that position. In order to get anything done, I had to work with each of my state counterparts. We weren't going to always agree, but being able to have frank and honest conversations allowed us to brief our ministers appropriately and let them fight out the issues, which again is the appropriate forum.

Lots of people had always said to me that working on Commonwealth state issues is hard going. You've got eight significant stakeholders to try and negotiate with. And fundamentally, they're never going to agree. I'd avoided it until working on the NDIS and now I understand why people say that. But it's absolutely critical that the relationships were in place. And interestingly now, a number of the people that I worked with in that role are my counterparts on issues like child protection and housing. So as I grapple to get my head around my new job, I've reached out to some of those state and territory colleagues to pick their brains about some of the issues that I'm identifying. So those relationships are forming a really positive foundation for me in a new role.

Without the ability to work through others, to collaborate, to find common ground and to be able to identify and work through the different points of view, getting anywhere on things like vaccines or on the NDIS would've been impossible. So I thought I'd take a little bit of time to talk about how do you build good relationships? Now, some of this is obvious, but I thought I'd just share it anyway. It takes time. You have to invest. And the more senior I have become, the more I've seen this is critical to my role. I spend a lot of time getting to know my staff, my ministers, and their staff, and my stakeholders. I've been in my current job for three months now. I have five ministers, some of whom are labor and some are greens and getting to know them and getting to know their priorities, their likes, their dislikes, and building their trust in me has been probably my biggest focus in this job.

I spend at least a day, a week on engaging with ministers. So it seems like a big time overhead, but it's absolutely critical to my role that those relationships are in place. And I hope that over time, it'll lessen a bit, but it's not going to lessen a lot. So invest the time and invest it upfront.

Second thing I'd say is you have to be honest. Often you won't be able to share info or be as open as you would like. I've learned that holding cards close to your chest can be very damaging to relationships, but it's okay to tell people, look, I can't talk about that right now. I expect to be able to talk about it later or not, can go a long way in maintaining trust. I once worked with a Commonwealth Minister who I won't name, but a difficult character. And he prevented public servants from sharing information, even across the department, let alone across other parts of the public service or with stakeholders in general.

So it made it really hard to get things done. And you had to be able to make a judgment about where you could share info that might get you in trouble. Where you could trust people to treat that information appropriately or where you'd be able to say to people, look, my minister won't let me share that with you. That was really critical in maintaining that trust in those relationships and not doing that and just staying silent actually can be very damaging.

The next thing I'd say is be willing to have hard conversations. Just like any relationship professional or personal things will not always be rosy. But calling out bad behavior, being able to have disagreements, being frustrated, all of those things will happen. But if you've invested in building positive relationships, then these things can be overcome.

The last thing I'd say, that's probably pretty topical in the environment in which we work at the moment is meet people. It's really hard at the moment, but don't rely on meetings or formal engagements to get to know people. Don't communicate solely by email or electronic messages. Pick up the phone, have a video call or meet face to face when you can. These are much better interactions on which to form good relationships.

So the final thing I'd like to talk about is just to share some of my experience about how hard things are when the relationships are not there. I joined the ACT government in the midst of the pandemic and the lockdown. And now, first three months I've only just started to meet some of my people face to face. I don't have the same network in the ACT Government that I had in the Commonwealth. I know some people, but I don't know them well. I've only worked with one of my direct reports and even then, not in depth. So I don't have that same network that I had established in the Commonwealth. And it's really hard to establish it through screen-based interactions. There's just no substitute for talking to people in real life.

But Canberra's a small town and many of my people have found out, have done some due diligence on me. So far, I think the feedback is positive, but I can't be sure. So reputation's important, I'll come back to that a bit. I'm going to give you an example of an issue that I'm working through now and how hard it is to work in an environment where the relationships have not yet been established. So I run a number of large operational functions on behalf of the ACT Government. In particular public housing and child protection. Significant issues dealing with really vulnerable cohorts of our community and some pretty high stakes, if we don't get things right. And in one of those operational areas, there are some really significant problems.

The culture's really bad, there's significant bullying and harassment happening. Some people are feeling psychologically distressed and their mental health is being impacted. And there's a divide that's emerged between staff and leaders and managers. I take these issues really seriously. I have to. Not only do I have a legal responsibility when it comes to workplace health and safety, I have a moral responsibility to make sure that people are safe in the workplace. But I also have a responsibility to the government and to the clients that we serve to make sure that people are doing their job. When you have all of those other issues happening around culture and bullying, and there's a lot of emotion, there's a lot of angst going into it. And we are not necessarily focused on the job. I've taken responsibility for resolving some of these issues and getting personally involved. But the staff don't know me. They don't trust me. They haven't gotten an established relationship with me.

So I'm using multichannel interactions to work with people. Email, video messages, I've had some face to face meetings with staff. I've started to walk the floor for those staff who are back in the office and I'm taking every opportunity I can to engage with people, but setting some really clear expectations in terms of behaviors. It'll make or break the relationships that I have with that area of my team. And I'm hoping that it'll be positive, but it's really difficult. And if I had an established network and relationship in the directorate, it would make a big difference. I just give you that example as a current thing that I'm facing, that doesn't matter how long you've been, what kind of level you you're at, what kind of role you're in, these things are really critical.

Just one final point before I let you go onto the rest of the day. So the thing that I would say to you is get to know your peers. Look at the people on this screen. None of you know where your career may take you and who you will encounter. Don't burn bridges, because you may work with that person, for that person, with that person in the future. So build a positive reputation, invest in that heavily, maintain those relationships and you never know who you'll come across in what context for the rest of your career. So good luck, enjoy your day and thank you for having me.