

### **Mental health was taboo:**

I suppose mental health, going back when I first started work, was not even something... I don't even know if the term mental health had been... I don't know if that was an actual thing. There were lots of derogatory terms for when people weren't having a great time or when at their best, but I don't think there was actually... Yeah, it wasn't a thing. It was probably still taboo back then, I would say, that...

Well, it is sometimes still now, depending on who you're speaking to. We had sick leave and you didn't ring up and say, "I'm having a bad day." You still get people, I know now, that will call up and pretend they've got a cold. Probably not now in COVID, but they'll pretend they've got a cold when they need a mental health day, because it's okay to have a cold, but it's not okay to be having a mental health day.

### **You can't do that, you're our leader:**

It was a \$200 million job and it was very intense. We had a lot going on, a lot of milestones, a lot of pressure, and I was really feeling it. My kid, Oscar had actually just been diagnosed, so I was carrying that. So what I decided to do was I could see it on my team's faces and I brought them into the meeting room and I said, "We're having a team meeting." And they'd come in and they said, "Where's the minutes?" I said, "There's no minutes." I said, "I'm struggling." And I just said, "This is what I'm seeing. This is what I'm doing. I've got a bit going on at home." And I said, "How are you guys going?"

And I didn't individually identify, but I drew some really good conversations out of some of them, but after the meeting, and this is where it hit me, my site manager stayed back and goes, "Mate, what are you doing?" I said, "What do you mean?" He goes, "Mate, you're a leader. You can't say that." I said, "But mate, I am. Don't you guys deserve to know that if I can't and that it's okay if you are too." I was just trying to have a conversation and try and normalize it that mate, we're not superman, what we're going through. And we had the

conversation and then he just slumped in his chair and goes, and again, I won't repeat the language. He goes, "Yeah, but I am." "Yeah, I am too." And he wasn't depressed, but he was exhausted.

So from then on, we weren't running around and sitting in circles singing kumbaya and everything like that, but it did at least give people a guise to go, "I'm tired. I am just over this." Or in that sort of, I guess, the language that you can reasonably expect.

### **He asked me how my weekend was:**

With John, he was the only boss early on that really sort of would be like ... It was just him and I, and I'd walk up and he'd be like, "How was your weekend?" And then get a chance to have a chat about it. Or he'd see what I'm having for lunch and he'd be like, "Why are you eating that crap?" You know what I mean? (laughs). But it came from a caring place. In trade, it's very ... It can be quite brutal, but him saying that he's like, "What are you doing?" He's a very proud Italian fellow and he's like, "That's a problem with you, you Aussies." He would always say to me, he's like, "We have pasta and whatever else, we've got this good energy and you're rocking up with a Four'n Twenty pie," and then he'd give me some pasta or something. He's like, "Start rocking up with a proper lunch, mate." It sounds like he's having a go at me, but for me it was like 'oh yeah, actually, maybe I do need to have to start thinking about what I'm packing for lunch'. Because this bloke worked hard as, how does he do it? So then you want to try to emulate that. Yeah, I think I felt a little bit cared about in that position, he was a good fellow.

### **Top 3 traits:**

The top three traits I would say are listening. So I had a really good mentor, and they were always there to listen and take it in and give feedback where it was a learning experience rather than a, "This is what I've done, so therefore this will work for you." It's always

guidance. So another trait was that they were willing to give guidance, but not dictate, which I think is really important because we are all our own person. We will find what is most comfortable for us rather than someone else trying to tell us exactly how it should be. I think the third one is being relatable and genuine. So where you know that a mentor or a manager is coming from a genuine or relatable space, it does sink in. And it probably goes hand in hand with respect. When someone comes in that hasn't gained your respect and is very dictative about, "This is the approach you should take," automatically you switch off because you feel that they're not taking you into consideration. They just want an outcome that suits them.

**They didn't think it was wrong:**

They've done the wrong thing, but it's probably because they didn't think it was wrong. So we quickly learned, you pull them aside one-on-one and you don't yell at them. You just say, "Look, you did this. This is why it's not okay. Keep it in mind," whatever. Whatever the conversation is you've got to have with him, but that's how we deal with it. We're not going to tear their head off and kick them out and go, 'alright, back to work'. It's just, we have a calm conversation with them and explain why you don't do this, or you don't do that, or this is the way we do things. They always understand. It's never been an issue. All of our employees are comfortable with us as well, so that's one of the benefits to how we do it is they can come to us when they've got a personal issue now as well, because they know we're not going to judge them or tear them to shreds. It's a very calm environment. It's not aggressive at all.

**If you want a stable workforce:**

I think it is that opportunity for communication. Like it is time-consuming and it does take resources, but if you want a stable workforce, then I think it's worth the investment. So I know people say they're time-poor and those sorts of things. To really address these

issues, it does take the resourcing. But it's not to say that it has to be those majors, it could be someone else within the organization that does that checking in. So it is a check-in, so it is like, "How's your first week gone? How's your second week gone? You know, if there's any tweaks of issues." You know that whole, "it takes a village thing." Well, it goes on and on, it's not just about children, that's just about having a supportive community.

### **You don't just get paid to do the fun bits:**

Different people need different styles of management, which is uncomfortable for me. But sometimes, people do need to be managed differently. And although I was in management, I always had a manager above me as well. So then I'm trying to manage employees' expectations, but also my manager's expectations. So sometimes, being the meat in the middle is not always fun, but you have parts of your job that you love and then you have parts that you wish you didn't have to do. But you don't just get paid to do the fun bits unfortunately.

### **Suicide on site:**

I was the project manager on the work site building when we had one of the guys on site suicide, and it just sent shock waves through the whole thing, and everyone just stopped and went... but, I actually had to take the owner of the company off site and took him out for a coffee, and I just sat with him for 15 minutes while he had his head in his hands. And so you're sort of starting to see the effects, but see people acknowledging and opening up on them too, which I think's really positive.

### **What is means to be strong:**

I think that the way that I carry myself these days, I get to dictate terms to a certain extent on what it means to be strong. And if you're able to say it with conviction, that you know, "I'm strong enough and brave enough to know when I need time out," or, "I'm strong enough and brave enough to know when I need to go seek professional help," or something like that, and you're able to say it with conviction, then no one can really question that people pick up on that; that you are secure within yourself and you do know that that's the right thing to do. So yeah, I definitely think that it has changed these days, but I think that for a lot of people, it hasn't.

#### **I came back and I'd been demoted:**

So I found out I was pregnant and I told him, this boss of mine at (beep), and he canceled a trip that I had. I was meant to be going to Singapore to present. And after he found out I was pregnant, he decided just to cancel the trip and didn't give me a reason why. And then, I went on maternity leave. I didn't have a long maternity leave. I reckon I was off for six or seven months and I came back and I'd been demoted.

#### **They only cared once I'd given notice:**

My first paid job was in a childcare center, it was brand new and I was thrown in the deep end into the babies area. So I had lots of experience with kids, I wasn't scared about it, but there wasn't a lot of policy and procedure in place, and it was all pretty vague about the expectations and that kind of stuff. I'd actually moved states as well, so they weren't interested in anything to do with my personal self, that I'd relocated. I lived in a tent for six months when I first got there and trying to find my feet, and so there was no interest at all and it was just about, "This is who you are, you've come to work, look after these kids," and it was a real focus on the administration. It freaked me out how stringent they were, and it wasn't until I'd given notice, then she wanted to know whether there was any way she

could support me in what was happening in my world. But it wasn't until I'd actually given notice that she asked any of those questions.

**Guess my bra size:**

I can talk about another experience that was there that was really awful that I ended up putting in a sexual harassment complaint. So the other thing that the men used to like to do was quarterly go on these, I don't know what they called them, planning days or workshops, so I had to get invited to that because I was on the management team. So the first one was a golf day and I just explained to the guys that I'd never played golf before. So they suggested that I could drive the drinks buggy around, (laughs). And then another one we had was in Tasmania and I had to go out on a fishing boat. They all got really, really drunk, and I was the only girl on the boat and it was really uncomfortable. And then they started playing this horrible game that they were trying to guess what bra size I wore.

**Weekly discussions about stress:**

I have a lot of discussions with my manager weekly about how we're going personally with our stress levels, anxiety, how we're coping with workload, and things like that, and it's a really healthy environment.

**My boss dacked me:**

One of my first jobs, I had a boss who was just horrible and now would probably be taken to Fair Work or WorkCover for harassment, who dacked me in front of a whole heap of other young men, and I was only like 15 probably then, and then it happened a second time and somebody else saw and told my mum what had happened. So I didn't last long there, after that, and the owner of that business had repercussions from my mother. Back then

though, I'm talking like 25 years ago, we weren't taught that, that wasn't unacceptable. Like that was just like, "You just suck it up and do your work." But I'm much older and wiser now, and I think I'm a fairly strong woman, so that wouldn't fly even once now.

### **Bit a cancer won't hurt ya!:**

I remember this one time I was working for (beep) cutting REO bar, and he just sort of pushed me out of the way because I was stuffed, I'd done like 10 cuts which was just not satisfactory, but I was just a young bloke, I was only 18 or 19.

And he was 70 something at the time, he whips his shirt off, he goes, "This is how you do it," and he's just gone boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I couldn't believe it and I'm looking on his back, he's got this massive lump. I actually had to say to him, I'm like, "Have you got that lump checked out on your back? Like what's that?" And he's like, "Oh, don't worry about that, that's nothing." Like I know full well he doesn't even wear sunscreen.

If I stopped to try and wear sunscreen, (laughs) he told me, like this was his belief, he's gone, "You just need to get burnt pretty bad half a dozen times, and then you'll start to tan." You know what I mean? It's like he doesn't even know basic science, let alone how to deal with people's emotions and troubles that they might be having in their personal life.

Like it's absolutely laughable and ridiculous, but like at the time, these types of people were in control of businesses and probably companies as well. Even today it's still happening. So it was like, I'll go home and I'll have a laugh at it, but while you're in the moment, you're just like, this is like my safety is it at risk here, and he's telling me like, you just need to cook yourself in the sun – bit of cancer won't hurt ya.

### **Bullying claim against me:**

So, David and I decided to start a small business so that we could have more control over the culture of the organisation that we went to every day, and that wasn't really very easy either. So, I was genuinely shocked that I'd started a business to try and have somewhere that is safe, and a good place to work, and I had a bullying and harassment claim against me. So, I think it just kind of shows the complexity of people, and when we were talking before, about people's mental health and how they're coming to work and how different things can be perceived in different ways.

It's not easy from any side of the story. It's not easy being an employee. It's not easy being an employer, as I found out. Eventually, we got there, but God, it took a lot of work. I think I really underestimated the amount of work it takes with people more so than processes and systems and sales and marketing and what you're doing. So much of it is about how you manage the staff that you've got and make sure that everybody is happy.

### **Are you trying to make me cry?**

We've been really, really flat out, and I've been working sometimes 11, 12-hour days, and it did get to me. Yeah, even to the point where my CEO took me, he said, "I'll shout you lunch. Come on, we'll go up the street, we'll get some lunch."

He got me to listen to this YouTube clip, and the guy was effectively on radio saying goodbye to his daughter who was moving away from home, and it was all about him saying that he will never get back the time that he should have spent with his daughter or the time that he had with his daughter while she was still at home.

So I'm sitting there and I'm listening to this, and I was about to go into interviews, I'm sitting there going, I said, "Are you trying to make me cry?" And he threw me the tissues and he said, "You've got a young family. You've got a choice, but spend the time." He said, "My biggest regret as a CEO is I was so busy when my kids were so young." And he said, "And it's the things that I forgot to do, those simple things. Kids, I took them overseas." And he said, "They had a really good life, but that's because I worked in positions that allow me to."



But he said, "It was the little things like me getting up and making them breakfast that they always remember."

**They were pretty strategic about it:**

My time on site with Wires Electrical having a laugh when it was time to have a laugh, but then sort of knuckling down and being serious and having a healthy sort of time pressure on jobs when you needed to as well. But then there was that whole thing with them that they would ask questions about like oh, they'll maybe pick up on the fact that I'm not doing so great so that they would sort of say, "Hey mate, how are you going? Is everything okay?" Or they would maybe let me in a little bit with like, "Oh, this this is going on in my life. How are you doing with this or that?" They were pretty strategic about it, I would say, but you were able to have open and honest conversations with them and there's that whole thing of you spend most of your life at work so you don't want to have to go to work every single day and have to pretend to completely be somebody else. It just made me feel really welcome, and enjoy my time while I was working with them.

**People are human:**

Part of being a good manager is being understanding that people are human. So not everyone is going to have a good day every day and that's okay. There's still a level of a, like a standard we have to keep because we get paid, but being mindful that some people will have lower productivity at times. We are all human and I think that yeah, mental health, that comes down to mental health. So I think this year has been a real big struggle for, I'm just going to throw it out there and say probably 95% of the population has had some sort of not great mental health at some stage this year and that it's okay, it's not a taboo subject.

**Conversation to support them:**

I guess the start of the conversation with someone that I feel like they need to chat with someone, I always lead it with the conversation about that I've noticed over the last few days or week that there's been a bit of a change in your coming to work early or turning up late and being specific about what I've recognized and then make them feel assured that the conversation is completely about making sure that they're feeling valued and feeling that we're going to have a conversation about, hey, how you're going. It's not about being disciplinary. It's completely about making sure that you feel valued and that we care and that we want to know how you're tracking and how you're going. So having a conversation about is there anything that we can do to assist? Is there anything that you'd like to feel comfortable sharing? Or is there any support we can give?

**No hard feelings:**

I think it's with anything though, when there's a tension between people is when you talk it out, that's it. You realize it's not that big of a deal and there's never any hard feelings. So it gets better because now you've set the bar a bit higher and they'll always go by that. They're not going to make that mistake again, so professionally things are better, but personally, things get a bit better too, because they just become more and more comfortable with you. They know our expectations and we know how they're feeling about things, so it's beneficial the way we approach it in so many different ways.

**Biggest barrier to mental health:**

Probably the biggest barrier to people being able to manage their own mental health first and foremost, one of the biggest impacts at the moment is not having the presence of mind or the tools or the skills to deal with it or the support networks.

### **Didn't hide their personality away**

I got put on with Wires Electrical who are based out of Belmont. The best experience that I've had employed anywhere was working with those fellows because they had a very young business and they had their teething issues and whatever, but they had a laugh out on site and they didn't hide their personality away. These fellows would be like, "Oh, you want to go for a drink at the pub after work?" I felt a bit included.

It was a really rough patch for me when I did get my apprenticeship in my personal life. I was struggling very hard, but a lot of me getting through that was the fact that I was able to go to work and it was a bit of an escape. So I was struggling in my personal life, but then I'm coming to work and I'm enjoying it. If I didn't have that, I've got absolutely nothing and you're probably in a really poor position, so that stuck with me.

### **Clear about expectations:**

What else? And just be clear about your expectations. So I am pretty firm as a manager. We have to get the work done. And so I allow for people to make mistakes as long as they experience it as a learning process and are prepared to experience it like that. But I am pretty firm about what the expectations are and offer additional supervision and support while people are learning them.

### **You will make mistakes:**

I've had really good bosses. I think I'm an over-thinker, so I'd always think of the worst possible scenario. But when I made my first mistake, my bosses just had to reassure me that it wasn't the end of the world, "You haven't done anything major that would upset us or put us in a position where it would hurt the business. Mistakes will happen," and just reassure me that "You are going to make mistakes, it's about how you deal with the

mistakes." So being upfront, being open, recognising the mistake, but also coming with a solution of how you believe you're going to fix it.

### **You've cost me money:**

So he was a bit of a, well he was a one-man band, not really well organized. You know, sometimes arrive a bit bleary-eyed himself, he might have had a rough night the night before, and he'd sort of go missing a bit during the day. Pretty short fuse, so there were some days where you couldn't do a lot right.

You know I remember one example where— I was a pretty cluey kid when it came to maths and stuff like that, and we were doing some quoting and he gave me the quote sheet and it just had plus 10 plus 10 on top of the supply costs. I said, "What's that?" And he goes, "Oh, since I got that, there's been two 10% increases, so I just take that and I add 10%, and I add 10%." And I said, "You should add 21%." He sort of looked at me and just walked off.

So, I actually took it on myself and I sat there and I ruled up a line and you know come out, and I'd actually done a full plus 21% column, and I come out and said, "Look, there you go, I've sorted it out for you. You know, I reckon I've made you a few dollars there." He goes, "Yeah but you've cost me," and he looked up at the clock, and in that moment I thought, "That took me 15 minutes on \$4 an hour and you're upset with me, I'll just leave it at that."

### **Too busy for you, go away:**

And my boss there, he was a very busy man, but he was a very rude man, and so I was in a management role, I would only go to him with things that I legitimately needed his approval or guidance, I wouldn't go to him with day-to-day stuff. And often I'd walk to his office door and he would look up and just look at me and say, "I'm just too busy for you right now. Go away."