

What makes a leader truly memorable?

Three innovators shared their insights at Think., *Qantas* magazine's thought leadership series that combines smart conversation with great food and wine. The panel discussion, held at SK Steak & Oyster in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley, was moderated by Editor-in-Chief Kirsten Galliot.

Pip Marlow

Pip Marlow is a renowned tech leader, having just finished up as CEO and EVP of Salesforce in the APAC region and running Microsoft in Australia for six years. She's a member of Chief Executive Women and is someone who lives by the motto, "If you want to make people believe you care, you just have to care."



David Knoff

When he went to Davis research station in the Antarctic as expedition leader in 2019, David Knoff and his colleagues had signed up for one year. The pandemic turned that into 537 days, a true test of mental strength, resilience and leadership under pressure. A former Army officer and diplomat, he has since written a book about the experience.



Margie Hartley

As the founder of Gram Consulting Group, Margie Hartley is one of Australia's most in-demand executive coaches. She's worked with 11 out of the top 20 ASX-listed companies, helping their leaders to realise their full potential. Her podcast, *Fast Track: Career Conversations*, is a masterclass in leadership.



Think.

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KIRSTEN GALLIOTT: Pip, you actively ask for feedback, including from junior staff who probably feel a bit daunted about sharing with their CEO. How do you drag it out of them?

PIP MARLOW: I remember, early in my career, going to meetings with execs and afterwards they'd say, "That was a great meeting." I thought it was a disaster but no-one said so and they had no idea of the impact they'd just had on the room. So typically, at the end of a customer meeting, I'll ask my staff, "What feedback do you have for me on the meeting? How could I have helped you and the customer more?" The first time you ask, it's, "Thanks so much. You were fabulous." That can feel good for five seconds but it doesn't give me anything to build on. So I say, "Thank you for that. Next time I ask that question, I want you to give me one thing that's constructive." Then I start to get the nuggets that could really help them and our customers. You have to make sure you're not just asking once in a cursory way. You've got to show them you want it and that you'll do something with their feedback.

David, you also got a lot of feedback when you were in Antarctica – and not always the kind you wanted...

DAVID KNOFF: After being stuck in Antarctica for a year and a half, everyone's an expert. By the end of it, there were 24 expert station leaders, doctors and plumbers. You have to take your ego out of it, even if you think the feedback's a bit harsh or misdirected. As the leader, I look at their point of view. Have I explained it properly? Did they understand the priorities around why their project was ahead of or behind another project? Feedback comes with a reason and they've

probably rehearsed it, at least in their mind. That means it's usually coming from the right place. As a leader, if you're seen to listen, take it on board and work around those problems, you'll be in a better position.

Margie, how has leadership changed in the two decades you've been coaching?

MARGIE HARTLEY: The fundamentals are still the same – know your strategy, set a vision, motivate, connect, get clarity, make sure expectations are clear, create a feedback culture so it's a dynamic place to be. Leadership in good times is great but give me a bad time and everyone reveals themselves in that moment. Right now, something different is going on. There is a shift and a lot of leaders are feeling it. The expectation of leaders from employees is different. People's community attachments are much less significant than they were years ago – I think only about 11 per cent of people go to church now – and the expectations about work and schools are massive. Teachers feel it and leaders in workplaces feel it.

Amid such high expectations, how do leaders build trust?

MH: Trust is the foundation of all relationships and leadership is a relationship business. We assume a leader has capability, a strategy and commercial and financial acumen but the thing that'll make the difference to your ability to succeed is the relationship you have with yourself and your people. Self-evaluation – how do I evaluate who I am and what I do? – is so important. Talented leaders have clarity about who they are and how they lead and everybody wants to follow them.

David, can you tell us about the importance of trust for you?

DK: Prior to my Antarctic career, I had the joy of being a diplomat and was posted to Australia's embassies in Iraq and Pakistan. What we were doing had strategic implications for ourselves and Australia's other partners over there. When the foreign minister of the day trusted the team, it really stood out. The direction would come to us in the field and we'd get out there and do it. We knew that right at the top, our leader trusted us, the people on the ground who were delivering Australia's foreign policy. When we worked with other ministers who didn't show that same kind of trust in us, the impact on the ground was noticeable. It was, "Oh, they don't trust us anymore so what are we going to get done over here?"

When I took over running Davis station back in 2019, I was quite new to the Australian Antarctic program but the team around me had all sorts of experience. In that case, you trust your team. I'd say, "Hey, I'm new at this. Teach me what I need to know and I'll help you get what you want to achieve."

Pip, you have 4500 staff. Do you feel the weight of expectation as a leader?

PM: It doesn't feel like a weight but I do think it's changed. If you're the captain of the ship, the ship's been in pretty good weather for a long time, especially in Australia. So for a lot of leaders in this country, their skills are about sailing in good times. But right now, our leaders are being challenged in more turbulent waters with more complexity. Your employees want you to think more about the stakeholders and less about the

Set boundaries

"A hallmark of the Antarctic stations are the boundaries between work and play. There's a leadership structure but we're all equal in the eyes of the community. If I didn't do the dishwasher properly – bang – they'd let me know. Being away from October 2019 to April 2021 was like time travel. When I got back to Australia, one thing that really struck me was how everyone was working 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I was like, 'What the hell happened here?' Going into a year on an Antarctic station, we know those boundaries are so important. We had clear rules. We worked from 7.30am to 6pm. After six o'clock, it was, 'Do you mind if I ask you a work question?' Understanding that boundary between professional and social is vital."

— DAVID KNOFF



Progress over perfection

“I’m about progress over perfection – unless you’re doing heart surgery on me, in which case perfection is really good! Other than that: progress, progress, progress. Let’s just keep getting better. Let’s figure out what did and didn’t work. If we’re open-minded and stay curious then, yes, we’ll make some mistakes but we’ll try again. Keep in mind that we’re working as a team. Have a little bit of kindness and forgiveness for each other – and assume good intent from others.”

— PIP MARLOW

shareholders. It’s not just how much profit you have. It’s the employee experience. It’s your customer outcomes. It’s your planet and sustainability. It’s our First Nations peoples. Delivering growth at all costs is not the type of leadership expected now. And so, as leaders, we have to ask what are the things in our toolkit? What’s our leadership response to that changing context? What will we do differently?

Can that feel overwhelming at times?

PM: It can feel overwhelming. I think prioritisation is so important. I always say that being busy is a decision and not an excuse. So I’ve got to make some real decisions about where I spend my time. What am I stopping doing? What’s most important right now? Am I adjusting my leadership response to the changing context? If you don’t put your head out and get above the parapet, you miss the opportunity to look.

What about the path to making decisions? You want to seek input and buy-in but sometimes leaders just have to make a call, don’t they?

DK: It comes back to leading the situation you’ve got. There’s no time for democracy in an emergency. In a situation where the market’s going to close, a competitor’s going to launch or the ship is on fire, you’ve got to be decisive. But it’s important to debrief after a decision has been made – whether it’s good or bad. There are scenarios where there’s time to get everyone’s opinion and you say, “Thanks for that. We’ll come back and give you the answer.” In my experience, the team appreciates that. Being decisive should always be respected.

MH: I want to point out that making a decision is not being a dictator. Sometimes we think about this idea of “command and control” up here and “collaborative” down here and everything in between is bad or grey. People want decisions from you. People want that strength. They want the direction and they want it explained with great clarity – why you’re doing what you’re doing – as well as looking for feedback. That is an effective culture. People are desperate for leaders to be decisive. They don’t want weak leaders who are just always collaborating.

Do leaders struggle with knowing when to support and when to challenge, Margie?

MH: People can be very supportive, coaching leaders and I believe that’s the style that can be the most effective. But being a coach doesn’t mean you don’t challenge. Being challenged is an opportunity to grow and learn. People come to work for so much more than money – they’re coming to work for the experience of satisfaction, fulfilment, growth and potential. To offer that, we can’t just support people all the time. It’s about performance peak, where there’s enough challenge and stretch for a goal and enough support in the resources, tools and education you’ve given somebody that they’re going to be worth their weight in gold to you. If you only support somebody, you get the frozen middle, the complacent, the laissez-faire. But we also don’t want so much challenge that someone is fearful to come to work or to make a mistake. So it’s a really important balance for leaders to get right.

Does that apply to leaders as well? Pip, do you need to feel a little bit uncomfortable in your own leadership to be sure you’re continually striving?

PM: Creating great teams means sometimes I have to get uncomfortable and do things that push me out of my natural preferences. Earlier in my career, a coach said to me, “Pip, you need to make it clear to your team whether you are the chef or the ingredient – some days you can be the ingredient and be part of it and on others you need to be the chef but you can’t waffle in between.” I love to work collaboratively to get to the best possible outcome but sometimes I have to make that uncomfortable call. The toughest decisions for me are around people. I care about the people on my team but sometimes they’re no longer right for the team and you have to make that decision. The discomfort is a good thing. It’s telling you that you care – but it doesn’t mean you don’t go and do it.

David, what did you learn about how to motivate your team? You had 24 people who didn’t want to be there.

DK: Summer was easy. You’re in Antarctica. There are icebergs. That motivates people. But 12 months later, it’s still another perfect day and there are emperor penguins as well as icebergs but they’ve been there for a year. I’d ask them to think about why they came down there. It’s their one chance in a lifetime – they’ve paused their family life or other career to be there. Knowing your why and knowing your team’s why is very important. We all wanted to get home but I wanted to get home and be proud of what I did – that I had made the most of those opportunities. One of the fundamental lessons



I learnt in Antarctica was that leadership won't always be pretty, especially when you're pushed to the limits. I felt like I was failing at times – why isn't everyone happy? There's no way you're going to achieve that. But you keep trying. As a leader, you have to have a bit of blind optimism. If you give up, what chance does your team have?

So how do each of you hope that people will remember you as a leader?

PM: Helping to create the space and environment for people to do the best meaningful work of their lives.

MH: As a good deputy captain – the person who sits behind others to watch them succeed. I help people reach their potential and build the confidence to do that. Maybe they won't remember me because I'm sitting at the back and that'll be positive.

DK: Being a good team member. Don't be a leader just because you're in that position to move up to the next rung. Whatever team you're in – at an Antarctic station or in a business, family or community – be a good member of that team first and your leadership will come out of that. ✎

Keep in touch with reality

“Leaders aren't always in touch with what's going on with their people. I once challenged an executive leadership team to leave their cars at home and catch public transport to work and take a different route, to open their eyes to what was going on for other people. We get very caught up in our own problems. We only see what's before us. Leaders have to look up and out.”

— MARGIE HARTLEY

You're invited...

Our next Think. event will be in Melbourne on 13 November 2023.
For more information about tickets, visit thinkbyqantasmagazine.eventbrite.com.au.
Enquiries: rsvp@mediumrarecontent.com