**Stella:**

Hello everyone and my name is Stella Glory and welcome to Vision Australia's Employment and Leadership.

Now just a reminder that you can put your questions into the comment sections of the live feed at any time and we will answer those questions.

But first off, I'd like to introduce you to our panel this afternoon and we'll start off right down the very end and we have got Darren Fittler. Darren sits on the board for Vision Australia and his expertise in laws specific to charities and not-for-profit organisations and his generalist corporate and commercial law experience enables him to provide

innovative holistic strategic and targeted legal advice and practical guidance to the not-for-profit charitable and philanthropic sectors. Daren did I get that right?

**Darren:**

Yes, yes. I told you that you probably only had to do the first line but anyway.

**Stella:**

Well, welcome to the panel today.

And then sitting in the middle, we have Karen Knight who's the general manager in Queensland and northern New South Wales Client Services. In addition, she leads the National Advocacy and Engagement Team and represents the Vision Australia on a national peak bodies and through media appearances on national and metropolitan channels. Would it be fair to say that the Advocacy and Engagement Team do most of the work here at Vision Australia?

**Karen:**

They certainly do their fair share.

**Stella:**

Well, welcome this afternoon and right next to me is Chris Edwards who is the manager of Government Relations and Advocacy at Vision Australia. Chris is an experienced Human Services senior manager with expertise in improving organization performance in service delivery. Welcome this afternoon Chris and thank you so much for your time.

**Chris:**

Thank you Stella, it's great being here.

**Stella:**

So let's open it up for the first question.

This is about employment and leadership so I think the first question we should ask is what does leadership mean to you? Are you a born leader or can you learn to become a leader?

Chris, I'll throw that over to you first.

**Chris:** Luckily that's such a straightforward question, Stella!

Leadership for me is about, you know, some, it's about the ability to be able to influence people to achieve an objective and and that's through, you know, the great leaders have ability to be able to turn complex problems and

explain them simply and and then in there, they've also got the ability to continually adapt and actually, yeah, look

for opportunities and and and be able to, you know, make those changes and bring people with them and and I think finally the thing that I sort of think when I think about leadership is about, you know, thinking about the great leaders think about the people around them and, you know, put them first before putting themselves first.

And and the second part to the question – Are you born a leader or can you learn it? Look, you know, I think that everybody recognizes that you don't have to have authority to be a leader and, you know, like even on my son's football team there's the traditional captain but there's various people in in the team that, you know, because of their expertise; because of their their their skills or being able to communicate; people reach up and and see them as leaders. But you do, you do as a leader over time learn skills that improves your leadership skills. You know, whether that's being able to look at how you motivate people that, you know, have different ideas and different backgrounds; right through to, you know, dealing with conflict and being able to have all those people skills is, yeah, is really important as a leader.

**Stella:**

That’s a fantastic answer, we might come back to that a bit later on as well.

Karen this question’s for you, I'll ask this one. So, when you were job hunting or in your career, what are some of the biases that you've experienced and how do to overcome them?

**Karen:**

I think for me being blind and a female; one of the biases, particularly early in my career, was that I wasn't taken too seriously. But, because I'm fairly introverted, people often thought that I didn't actually have an opinion on anything. And I worked on this by working on my self-confidence, by taking time to reflect on how I could make myself heard and say something that people would listen to. So for me, I did try hard to be as good as the next

person and sometimes being blind I thought I needed to be better than the next person. Whether that's, whether that's right or wrong, it was certainly the way that I operated in the early part of my career. So for me I think it's resilience is is key and there are many people in situations that you'll come up against in your career that won't go as well as you hope it will but it's that ability to bounce back and to have things in your life that actually do nourish you and nurture you that you can rely on when times get tough.

**Stella:**

So, when you say that you weren't taken seriously, putting you on the spot here, do you have an example that you could give?

**Karen:**

Well, I trained as a psychologist early in my career and what I was often told was, “Well, you're blind. As a counsellor, you don't really know how people are reacting to what you're saying. You can't see their non-verbals, how could you possibly know how someone's reacting?”

Well, for me that was a ridiculous perspective because you can tell in so many ways: you can hear people's voices, you can hear the pace that they're speaking at, you can hear the intonation, you can often hear body movement that they might be putting their hands over their face or that might be crossing their arms – a whole lot of signs that tell you lots of things.

So for people to have perspectives about the way that you see your world and then build their own picture of how successful and competent you are from that, to me, was something that I struggled with early on.

**Stella:**

Thanks Karen and now this one over to you Darren. What is one piece of advice that you give people who are blind or have low vision, who might be navigating through their own career vocational journey?

**Darren:**

Well thank you for that, and I would have equally of like to have answered the other questions but this one's a good one too.

I think just to quickly put into perspective; one of the other reasons I'm sitting in the chair here is because I, in the law firm I work in, I'm a partner of that firm and I have people who work with and as part of my team and so what I encourage in my team and I encourage everybody regardless if you have a disability or if you're blind or vision-impaired or not, is that something really useful is just having good life experience.

It is, for a number of reasons. One of the key reasons is it gives you a point of reference. You want to start a conversation with someone, if you want to get to know someone, if you want to have sort of a way of building a relationship; having a broad breadth of life experience to help trigger that is really important. And you just don't

know who you're going to meet and what you're going to learn and whether or not that person you're speaking with might be a future employer or might be someone that can help you into a role. So if people are job hunting or even in a current job, you know, really explore other things around you.

I’ve got people in my law firm who say to me, “I can't make my Arabic class tonight because I've just got too much work to do” and I say, “That Arabic class is so important, like go and do it! You know, this can wait till tomorrow. Who knows who you'll meet there, who knows what you'll learn and guess what? Maybe in six months time, we'll meet a client and that client, you know, speaks Arabic or is also learning Arabic like you and you now have like a shared place that you can speak from and build a relationship and build your career.”

So I just really, really, really encourage people just to try things, you know - do ballroom dancing, start karate, learn a language, you know - whatever it might be, whatever opportunity comes along. Build that life experience and that will absolutely help in your employment career.

**Stella:**

And you're also striking a beautiful work-life balance there too Darren, promoting that.

**Darren:**

Yes, yes if I could practice what I preached, that’ll be right.   
Yes, though it does help balance those things out and you know, most of my extracurricular things now are with family and on the weekends but I do piano lessons with my daughter, I go to Taekwondo with my entire family

and still sort of trying to get out and about and try new things. I've only started both those two things in the

last 12 months and yeah, always pushing myself to learn new things and to meet new people.

**Stella:**

Now we've got a couple of questions that have come through from viewers and this one is from Tina - Who is a leader that you look up to and how have they shaped you? Now, I'll throw that open to anyone, any three of you who might like to answer that one…little bit of thinking time there.

**Darren:**

While people are thinking, I wouldn't mind - if it's okay - just taking up maybe one of the points that Chris made.

**Stella:**

Oh, please.

**Darren:**

I think sometimes people think about leadership in terms of people, as in, as opposed to, in terms of skills. You know that person's a leader. Well, that person might be a leader today, in the role that you see them but, in another environment,, they might not be. And because you might be a leader in the workplace, but you might not be at home, you know. You might be a leader on the football field but not in the workplace. You might be.

And so it's about the qualities and characteristics and what you bring to a particular role at any time. And so yes, while some people might have more natural traits around how they engage with people, have some more natural

charisma and and have sort of a way about them that might lend themselves to being, you know, more like leadership material; ANYBODY, in my view, can learn the skills of of good leadership.

**Stella:**

So it's more nuanced than that. Do you think we've locked ourselves into a particular ideal of what a leader is?

**Darren:**

100%

**Stella:**

So, I'll put you on the spot then Darren - who do you, who do you look up to as a leader?

**Darren:**

Well, I take inspiration from I guess all number of of people and and in a way, you know, I I have someone who

works in my team. People who look at my team would say, “Well that person reports to Darren,” you know, I'm supposed to be her leader. But, she's really amazing at the way in which she mentors other people in our firm and other people under her and, you know, I think that you know, she's, you know, a great leader in that regard.

And so I think just being able to identify traits in others and allowing those who inspire you - and it doesn't have to be you know Gough Whitlam or some amazing person that's sort of in the press all the time or a or a president of a country - it can be it, could be your mum and dad. It could be your children. It could be a teacher. It could be someone who works for you.

So, you know the the law, the leader of our law firm, yeah Danny Gilbert of Gilbert and Tobin, has some amazing traits that I think has helped with his success and the success of the firm. And so I look to him in certain ways that he behaves but there's other things that he does that I wouldn't necessarily agree with and so I don't necessarily adopt though.

So, it's again for me, it's not, it's not about the, a person per say, it's about a characteristic or two of that person

that you really resonate with.

**Stella:**

Now, got some more questions coming through but Karen or Chris, would you like to expand on anything that Darren said in relation to an inspirational leader?

**Karen:**

I think for me, I'd certainly echo what Darren says and that different times in your life, different things about leadership and people might appeal to you. So, there might be, for me, there's been times in my life where there's been what I would probably call elder states people of the, in the blind community have really influenced me really positively. Other times it has been particular, you know, public figures that might have done something that have influenced me.

So, it is about looking for traits and if, thatresonate with you and then integrating them where possible and where you can into your own style but at different times, different things appeal to you for different reasons.

**Stella:**

Mm-hmm

Chris did you want to touch on that?

**Chris:**

Well I don’t think I’ve got much more to add. I totally agree. I don't, you know, I don't ever think of one leader is sort

of my super influence but it's about, you know, I look at people and no matter who they are - whether they're in leadership roles or not as Darren and Karen says - and go that's pretty cool, I wouldn’t mind, you know, thinking about how I can use that in working in what I do.

**Stella:**

Now, we've got a question come through from Jane - how do you engage in self-development of your leadership?

Now, I'm presuming that question is about how you develop your own leadership?

**Darren:**

Can I answer, can I answer?

**Stella:**

You certainly can!

**Darren:**

I'm really passionate about this again because this is not something we're naturally born with in my view and one thing that I think potentially, we as blind people maybe even have a benefit over others, is is around that resilience in that often when you have a vision impairment or you're blind, you can't always do something the same way as other people do it. So we have to work out a different way or fail a couple of times and then and try again and I think what this does is it builds this sense of continuous improvement. You know tomorrow, we want to be better than we are today.

And I think my observation would be that people with disability more broadly but also you know people with vision impairment and blind, you know because of life circumstances, will generally have a greater sense of what that means, you know? How do I, how do I get better in order to improve? And when you take that approach to life and that mentality, you then ask, then you say well, what is the leader? How do I become a better leader?

I, in the last six months, have found myself thinking - being very honest here - that I'm pretty good at the big ideas, pretty good at having a vision - pardon the pun - but I'm probably not as good as I could be on execution. How do I actually get out of the whirlwind of a business-as-usual work that takes up my entire day, week, month and year and actually focus on some really important goals and bring my team with me? How do I do that? So I've actively sought out TED talks, writings from other leaders, you know, I guess textbooks and and and other books to help me get a better understanding of what I can can do better and I will be taking that knowledge, implementing it, seeing if it works and hopefully it will but if it doesn't, I guess I'll just have to try something else.

**Stella:**

We’ve got another question come through. Sorry Chris, were you going to add that one?

**Chris:**

I think the only thing I'd add to that is that, I think one of the things that I've learned is take on opportunities as they arise because yeah, one of the great things to learn is to be, you know, sometimes thrown into the deep end and to be able to work out things and engage the people that you need to, to be able to learn what you need to do. And so I think that I really encourage it, you know, anybody to, you know, if there's an opportunity that you know might expand your horizon, take it on.

**Karen:**

And just an additional comment to add to that is, sometimes I think as leaders, you feel that you need to know everything whereas actually you don't need to know everything, you can't know everything and you don't have all the answers and - it's okay to be vulnerable and say I don't know. And, but you know, this is the way we can find out together.

**Stella:**

Yeah, yeah - sometimes being a good leader is admitting that you don't know something.

Here's one from Kerry and this great question, what skill have you developed at school, school or uni that you have been able to take on into your career? So, is it one of those questions, because I remember sitting at school thinking am I, I'm learning this thing but am I ever going to use it in my, in my working life?

Can anyone think back to a skill?

**Darren:**

Yes, 100%!

**Stella:**

Yep, Darren.

**Darren:**

Others onthe committee – committee, others on the panel, feel free to jump in if I'm getting too enthusiastic here.

it's, I had a similar experience to Karen. I did a Social Work degree is my first degree before I did law and I was almost told that I couldn't progress through my university degree at all because in my second year, I had to do some specific work on, you know, counselling and nonverbal communication - exactly the same experience there. But through my Social Work degree and I think just through life more generally, empathy is the thing that I would encourage people to learn more about and to practice more. Empathy is the idea of really putting yourself into someone else's shoes, trying to really feel and think as what it might be like if you were in that place and if you need to, the third part of that in a, in a, in an environment, is so then you know feed that back to the person and check in with them – and there's, what I, what I'm feeling and what I'm thinking it might be like to be you in this position - am I on the right track?

And if you can really capture the concepts of empathy, you know, put yourself in the position of the person interviewing you for your job; put yourself into the position of your boss; put yourself into the position of the people working under and for you; put yourself into the position of your parents; of your children; of your, you know, your spouse; your your friends. In this scenario, what might they be feeling, what might they be thinking?

And it goes back to my first point, life experience, you know, it's much easy to put yourself into someone else's shoes and to feel and to think what it might be like to be them if you've had lots of experience of all sorts of things. Now, you'll never get it right because a person is their ownselves and they'll be feeling these things themselves but it is such a powerful tool and I would encourage anyone to try and master empathy. It'll help you go a long way.

**Karen:**

I’d agree with it and also being a good listener being able to just sit there listen because you'll learn so much more when you're listening then when you're talking and just actually listening not hearing like my children actually listening only not watching I

think the thing that I learned is that

at school and university is not to use

my vision impairment as an excuse not to

do stuff is that you know when I was at

school and at uni you know there were

stuff that you could probably try and

get out of that actually go all right

how do I problem-solve myself to go to

work out how I can do it rather than how

I can get out of it and I think that you

know if and that's followed through you

know my schooling and and studies but

also you know in looking at you know

what I do in the workplace and at home

and in the sports arenas and I think -

for me it's been organizational skills

developing good organizational skills

early have really stood me in good stead

for later on when you have so many

competing priorities in different

aspects of your life

but having great organizational skills

really does help you feel like you have

some sort of control over things you

might have answered this next question

Karin because I'm gonna throw this one

over to you we've got one from rouhani

how did you make the transition from an

operational role to leading a team and I

imagine you'd have to be quite organized

I think absolutely you do and sometimes

you make that transition before you've

even realized you've made it but that

you find yourself in a position where

you can't hope to do all the operational

things that maybe you once did and you

have to take a step back and say now

there are other people are doing these

things this is my part of the puzzle

that I need to support others to achieve

whatever the outcome is and that took me

some time it didn't happen overnight and

you also need to have trust in the

people that you work with and and be

really confident that they can deliver

you what you need and if you've got good

communication with them that happens

because they come to you and together

you problem-solve when things may not be

as on track as you wish but it is about

having a team around you with good

skills people you can trust

but people that you can also communicate

with and that it is it truly two-way

communication that they feel that they

can talk to you it's not just you know

talking to them now Chris here's one for

you this is a great question this is

from the gum it's very practical

question how did you train yourself to

remember a lot of information about

everything about anything in everything

I think that might go back to what

Darren was saying about life experience

well I think it's funny because when I

was younger and the assistive technology

wasn't as good there was the one of the

only ways you could operate is by

continuing to remember everything you

know now the way I deal with large

amounts of information which I have to

do every day in my role is get really

good assists

technology skills and so being able to

effectively use your the available

technology that can support you to be

able to you know we look at and review

information but also be able to

manipulate and stuff and so you know

things even simple things like you know

using Excel that you know some people

say that's really difficult for a blind

person being able to effectively do that

using assistive technology really helps

in processing the amount of large

information I do every day that's

fantastic

Karen or Darren would you like to can

you experience for me when I was growing

up I lost my sight gradually in my you

know from the age of birth really but

lost most my sight when I was around 13

and that was when technology was really

starting to come in and I wasn't really

taught Braille well I was but I wasn't

kind of whipped into shape about Braille

and so left to choosing between Braille

or playing on this new fancy talk

computer that talked to me then I was

always on the computer right so my

Braille skills were never good enough

for me to be able to read while I was

speaking or to take information in

through that medium and really by

necessity I guess I built this sense of

having to memorize things and what I

would say in terms of a memory and using

your own memory to help support you in

what you do through your life there's a

there's a couple of elements to it and I

think the first one is to actually

concentrate at the time properly listen

and take in the information now often

people will say I forgot where I put my

glasses and I forgot where I put my car

keys or I forgot where I put my cane

well actually the truth of the matter is

you never remembered in the first place

because you weren't paying any attention

at all to what you were doing so really

really pay attention to what you're

doing and the second thing I say is

trust in the amazingness of your brain

don't sit there

the entire time going must memorize must

memorize you know lock it away lock it

away just can't trust that if you are

concentrating well it'll be there when

you need it and then the third thing is

practice you know do this all the time

and with those three things and I

haven't read any books about this I

don't know this is just my view on my

experience I'm no scientist but that I

would say that in terms of training and

memory that's useful just in practical

life like I can't quote scriptures or

you know slabs of text but I can keep

concepts in my mind and speak about

things openly and without notes and you

know manage my way in a law firm

negotiating contracts and things without

having any documents in front of me

because I've developed the memory that I

have and I think a well-developed memory

is so important I was blind since birth

and early through school I did become a

good Braille user so that was a benefit

I had but at that time once I went to

university everything was still on

cassette and all the textbooks were

umpteen cassettes and so you know then

technology came and certainly helped but

for me it memory has always been really

important and I don't know if he ever

intended it but when I was a child I had

a step grandfather who used to practice

all these memory games with me

and it was in retrospect I really thank

you for that

but didn't realize it at the time and oh

sorry Karen was going to say we we are

running close to time and I'll let you

finish your story

now is it so I was just going to say

that you know it is about how you attach

information to concepts that you already

know how you encode information will

help you decode it and using some of the

tricks of memory here's seven plus or

minus two you remember things all those

tricks really helped so we're coming to

the close of our employment and

leadership Facebook live session here at

division of Australia we're very sorry

if we didn't get to your questions but

our social media

we'll get to those answers for you and

also this recording will be available on

our website shortly and I'd like to

thank Darren fiddler thank you very much

for since on the board here at Vision

Australia also to Karen ID our general

manager in Queensland and northern New

South Wales client services and also

Chris Edwards who's the manager of

government relations and advocacy here

at Vision Australia all leaders in their

own right and I'm still a glory and

thank you so much for your time today

Vision Australia blindness low vision

opportunity

Vision Australia logo three navy blue

ovals linked together diagonally within

a bright yellow rectangle