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Hi and welcome to Campbell Tickell's podcast CT Brief: Honest Conversations. In these episodes, we aim to reflect on both professional as well as personal experiences and insights, and hope to offer you some key takeaways that you can discuss within your networks. Join us as we have open and honest conversations on a wide range of topics that matter to people working across the not-for-profit and public sectors. In this episode, Gera Patel, Partner and Tracey McEachran, associate consultant at Campbell Tickell, reflect on what they have observed in the past year around wellbeing in leadership roles, as many of us return to offices in hybrid or another form is Autumn. Gera and Tracey discuss what leaders can do to ensure they are looking after their own wellbeing as well as how we can take the lessons from the past year into the present. We hope you enjoy this discussion. Let us know what you think.

Gera Patel

Hi, everyone. My name is Gera. I'm one of the partners at Campbell Tickell, and I've been chatting quite a lot to colleagues, as you probably would imagine over the last few months about wellbeing in the workplace. And I thought it might be quite interesting to share some of those thoughts. And one of the people I've been chatting to has been my colleague, Tracey.

Tracey McEachran

Hi, it's good to be with you here, Gera, and I guess it's us in conversation because we do quite a lot of work around leadership and leadership development, which of course, includes, wellbeing, both physical and mental fitness really. So my specialist - or area is that leadership development and a mental fitness so that people are fulfilled at work, happy at work and really using their - all of their resources well, and they're not coming in every day depleted because they're not paying attention to all aspects of themselves as leaders.

Gera Patel

And that's a really interesting concept. I think, Tracey, in terms of the context of leadership, because often when we're talking about leadership, we quite often focus on leaders needing to take responsibility for others. But it feels to me like the conversation has shifted a little bit. And when we talk about wellbeing in leadership, we're asking leaders to think about themselves. And I do wonder whether that makes people feel a little bit uncomfortable, a little bit awkward, perhaps a little bit selfish. What kind of experience have you had when you've been having those kinds of conversations?

Tracey McEachran

I think that's it really. I think you've got perceptions around what leaders should be, especially if we're talking CEO - that they know everything, they're the front of all knowledge. It is a little bit, you could say, pushing it - superhero status. So, I'm here to rescue the world. I've got very broad shoulders and a big brain, and I'm going to have all the answers for everybody and we can get - I think leaders can get stuck

in that role, what they think is expected of them. And therefore, think that they are a bit superhero and then not focusing on their own wellbeing.

Gera Patel

And I don't know about you, but some of the examples that I've seen, particularly in this period, where often organisations have had to be in crisis mode, kind of managing a crisis, certainly when the lockdown originally happened. But all of the kind of the subsequent challenges that the pandemic has brought us, and I've certainly seen a few examples from leaders who have actually kind of just broken down, who haven't been able to kind of sustain that "hero" status. or that - "Don't worry, I'm in control, everything is going to be okay" kind of level of being. And actually, the fall has had huge implications, not just for them and how they feel emotionally, but also for the people around them. And so it just strikes me that there's definitely something about prevention is better than cure, as it often is when we're talking about things to do with wellbeing and health.

Tracey McEachran

100%. It's like driving a car with no oil, you know, 100 miles an hour down the motorway, something is going to give and we're so busy thinking about the destination and that we must get there. This is a must, a should and the pressure of that we don't pay attention. And so I think that's what happens to leaders. All of us get on to autopilot mode and it becomes our way of being and we get hit in the road or the treadmill so hard we can't see where the slow down button is and we get into a cycle of this is how it must be, this is how it should be, and we don't take time to get our heads up and really look at the landscape and look at what's going on. We just get into this - because of course, everyone is so busy and the busier you get, the less time you have to get your head up to see what's actually going on. So we spend more and more time on autopilot, actually, and that's when things start to go wrong because we're not listening to our body. We're not listening to our own thoughts. We've got no built in time for reflecting because there's all this must do, should do, have to do type thing.

Gera Patel

And what kind of advice have you been giving to people who have approached you and said, "I'm struggling", or "I think I need some support"?

Tracey McEachran

I think the building time to reflect and there isn't one reality. We all carry our own reality, our own perspective of something, and we end up thinking that's the truth. So, I think the biggest thing is to build in time when you have energy - so not at the end of the day when you're washed up but maybe at the start of the day or a good time of day and stand back and go, "what's the reality?" "What's the evidence in front of me?" "What's really going on?" and "where am I getting caught up in my thoughts". So, separating your thoughts from the reality of a situation, if that makes sense. An example would be that say I'm talking to

you Gera and you're telling me that something's got to be done by next week, and I just take that as it's got to be done by next week. I'm not questioning. I'm not looking at the system it's in. I'm just really focused on the one thing, and I've not really challenged the thinking or my thinking around responding to you. So, building in time to reflect, I think, is the most important thing. I'm going to say I'm a coach, coaching is a great tool. For me, group work is the most impactful if you can get in with a group. And that's why we did the CEO wellbeing workshop, because you have time to sit back, take a bit of a helicopter view on your own thoughts. But you also have the mirrors around you, other people holding up mirrors. And that's the most healthy way to really get things into a perspective.

Gera Patel

It's good, isn't it? To not isolate yourself further at this kind of time and to kind of take some comfort that it's not just you, that the thing that's happening to you is probably happening to everybody or kind of almost everybody. And to kind of get that sense of it's okay to voice that, it's okay to say - I was doing a webinar a couple of months ago and we were doing a bit of sort of check-in with a group of executives and senior leaders in an organisation. And we were kind of going around the screen saying how we were etc. and the chief executive kind of we got to him - sort of 5th or 6th in the line-up, and he said, "I don't think I am okay". And he went on to kind of tell us why he was feeling that and people in the group were kind of visibly shocked. It was a really interesting reaction. I didn't know that he was going to say that. After when I spoke to him, it did feel like he was just responding to the moment and felt that it was really important to be truthful and that sharing kind of opportunity for him really changed things around. And it really changed the dynamic for how that leadership team were talking about moving forward, continuing to cope, managing kind of existing and new challenges. And so, yeah, there was something really kind of inspirational - I would say.

Tracey McEachran

For a leader to talk about their feelings or their fears or their sensitivities or feeling that things aren't quite right with them at the moment. It's such a strong thing to do because you are expressing your vulnerability. And there's something called vulnerability based leadership. And what you do is you give permission for everybody in the room to be honest, and that builds psychological safety. And if you look at psychological safety, it's one of the key building blocks for high performing teams. So, here when someone expresses vulnerability, what they're doing is helping the team, actually facilitating a much stronger performance across the team, then they would be if they stayed silent, which is the exact opposite to what people think. They think that if they express their fears or sensitivities, then they're going to demoralise or bring down the group. And in fact, it has is the exact opposite. And we're not here talking about someone that's constantly saying how bad things are - no, this is about really expressing how you feel in a moment, and that builds huge trust across the team, which is so good for people's wellbeing and performance.

Gera Patel

And some of the tips that I've heard from other leaders that I've spoken to have been they've kind of ranged from the really elaborate that have taken sort of quite a lot of organisation and a real kind of "I need to be distracted from my work. I need to create something that's a significant distraction because it's the only way I can escape" - all the way down to the other end at the end of the spectrum, and some really small things like - "I make sure that I go outside for at least 15 minutes in the day, whatever the weather is". And it's interesting, isn't it? That kind of range of things that you can do because it's very individual, but that range of things that actually are kind of within our grasp, within our reach. And you just find the thing I guess that works for you.

Tracey McEachran

Yes, it's little and often, but it's also prioritising that because it's very, very easy to go through your day and start to hit your emails, phone calls or whatever - meetings. And before you know it, it's lunchtime or the days nearly over, we get caught up. And so actually to diarise and schedule downtime is really important in the day. And whilst we think I don't have time for that, in fact, you will become much more productive and effective if you make time for it. That's the sort of paradox in the fact that we feel we haven't got time, so we don't do these things. And yet we become less efficient because we don't do these things. So just scheduling in those breaks, even if it's a two minute break to stand up, look at a painting, go for a wander around the garden or just sit and notice your breath.

Gera Patel

The little often feels like it's been quite a good maxim for people - certain people anyway.

Tracey McEachran

Definitely. Definitely. I think, because we are busy, busy, busy people, so it is finding things that fit in with the work and with your lifestyle. You've got work and home. And of course, you've got now that people aren't commuting to much, so you don't have that down time in between - though people complained about it. It might have been time for people to reflect. So, it is about building some of those things back in. I think your space and time. For me, that is the most important thing - is actually putting time aside for it.

Gera Patel

I like the thing that you said about the commute thing. It reminded me of somebody who told me that they've been doing a walk to and from work. So it would normally take them half an hour by public transport to get to their office. And so every morning they walk for half an hour before they go into their little spare bedroom. And they do the same thing at the end of the day. And she was telling me that she hated it at first, and she kind of, like was really annoyed that she made a commitment to do it. But actually, she now says it's the thing that's kind of saved her. And she puts her kind of sanity and her

wellbeing down to that hour that she takes every day going to and from work. And the kind of the symbolic bit of “my working day has ended and now, even though I'm in the same flat, house, building - whatever. I'm now going to do something different. I'm now focusing on something different. I'm giving my attention to different things or different people.”

Tracey McEachran

Yeah, definitely.

Gera Patel

So we're back, aren't we, kind of where we started? Which is about taking the time for reflection, being self-aware, listening to what your head, heart, your body. Perhaps listening to what other people have probably been saying to you and, yeah, just giving yourself - almost like giving yourself permission to kind of absorb that and think about a response to it.

Tracey McEachran

Absolutely. I think that every moment of a day is a learning opportunity about yourself. So there's a curiosity.

Gera Patel

You know though Tracey, when you say things like that, I will think it's one of Tracey's hippy sayings, but even an old cynic like me can recognise what you're saying in the context of how we look after ourselves as leaders, because actually, the implications, if we don't, are really serious, not just for us, but actually for our organisations as well. And it's the complete opposite of what it is that you think you're driving to achieve.

Tracey McEachran

That's so much so. The point of saying how much work did you have to do to be present was nothing, you just have to be there. And so that's exactly - for me, leadership, us, individuals, we have huge potential, much, much more than we ever use. And so wellbeing for me, it's not only stopping yourself from burnout, but it's going from good to really fulfilling your potential - that type of thing, and really about understanding yourself and building your own self-awareness and in doing so, helping others around you. So, that whole bit about stop in to be curious about what's playing out now. It really doesn't take long.

Gera Patel

And it is about, you know, the kind of like, the achievement, the success of things, those kind of measures that we often kind of resort to in order to kind of give ourselves or others kind of accolades. It's like, actually, wellbeing doesn't sit to the side of that, it's very much a part of that. And, you know, I do a lot of leadership recruitment for different posts, and candidates who do well in a process, they don't just turn up and it comes really easily and naturally to them. They've put in some work and they've come prepared to have some conversation about the things that challenge them. Often I think selection and interviewing is a really good example where it's really easy to think that you're successful in those scenarios by being your very best self. And that's true to a certain extent. But I would say actually being honest about yourself is probably more important. And I don't know, when you're kind of involved in either selection processes or things that kind of have a bit more of a competitive edge, like how can we help people to sort of think about the things that they need to do in order to kind of get ready for those sorts of scenarios? Because that's quite a big sort of feature of working life as well, isn't it?

Tracey McEachran

It is, it is, and what you're talking about there is when we're under stress or pressure situations and what tends to happen is - obviously, our fears come to the fore. Now, that will definitely have effect on our behaviour if we don't recognise what's played out for us. So, that can turn up as humorous or arrogance, and it can also turn up as lots of limiting beliefs and so anxiety. So these things come to the fore when we're feeling pressure or stressed and we're trying to deal with our fears and our sensitivities. So, interviewing or pressure situations, it's that self compassion that comes to fore there or can do - and can help in those situations. So your CEO that said that I'm not feeling quite right was a brilliant way, a great way of articulating those fears, but not being a slave to them. And that's what happens. I think we become slaves, so our behaviour is driven from the wrong energy. So, taking into an interview type thing - yes, absolutely. We're always performing that's a performance and be prepared. You really prepare yourself for interview so that when you arrive, you can be fully present. So, going back to your point about being present Gera, you know, we all have the ability to be present if we make the environment and prepare ourselves for that moment. And that's the same for interviewing or when the situation's stressful, it's been aware what is playing out for you, preparing as much as you can, knowing that you can't control everything, understanding what are the thoughts and feelings that are distracting you? And that again are only thoughts and feelings. They're not a reality, their thoughts. And really listening and being present at something like an interview. The problem is if you're so rehearsed or you're so in your own head or you're trying to protect your sensitivities there, what you get is a sense of inauthenticity as an interviewer, we immediately see if somebody is not opening up to us. It's in the body language. We cannot hide these things. So if you're very prepared, if you really genuinely research the job you're going for and the company you're going to work for and you go there again with this sense of curiosity, "do we have a fit?" rather than "I need to get this right or I'm on show here." It's a two way conversation. It's definitely a process, a selection process. But it is a two way conversation. So, as soon as we get into the energy, I think that it's really important we get this right, it's all down on our shoulders, then we probably interfere and stress, and that's when we cannot or we find it very difficult to be present.

Gera Patel

And something about looking ahead as well, because I think a lot of this year has been about managing the here and now and actually sort of trying to be in a position where you can feel optimistic, feel positive about looking ahead. And, of course, that's going to be different things for different people. But again, maybe it's kind of permission to say it's okay to talk about things that you're going to do next year or the year after - that you're not just sort of stuck in the here and now.

Tracey McEachran

That is completely vital to the vision it's completely vital. So we as human beings, we need to know the direction of travel, and we need it to be a vision that is aspirational and is in front of us, so we all understand what direction we're moving in. And so, you know, we probably don't talk about purpose and vision enough. I encourage people to talk about that at the front of every meeting. "What's the vision?" "How do we want to be in this meeting?" "What are we trying to solve, and how does it fit in with the vision?" So I'm a big sort of fan of bringing everything always back to "are we doing what we said we wanted to do?"

Gera Patel

Are we focused on the right things?

Tracey McEachran

Exactly, exactly.

Gera Patel

Yeah. Tracey, it's been really nice chatting, catching up with you. Yeah, really great to kind of have this discussion, and hopefully in sharing it with others, it will feel like a continuation of a discussion as well.

Tracey McEachran

Yes, it's been lovely being here with you, too. It's always good to have a chat. There's so much in that conversation Gera, and in your questions we probably could spend a day on one question to be fair. But if anybody listening wants to know more about psychological safety or any of the things that I've talked about, then do email into us at Campbell Tickell and I'd be more than happy to provide you with links and information on what we've talked about.

Zina Smith

We hope you enjoyed the second episode of CT Brief: Honest Conversations podcast. If you'd like to delve further into these issues, head to our website where you can read the latest CT Brief Issue 55, which contains several articles on mental health and wellbeing.