

Disability Done Different: Episode 19

Libby Mears on...not wasting a crisis

Podcast transcript

Audio Length: 00:31:20

Hosts: Roland & Vanessa T oy

Guest: Libby Mears

Start of Audio

Intro

Maia: You're listening to DSC's featured series Disability Done Different: COVID conversations. With the overwhelming situation of Covid 19 affecting us all, we believe that communication is key right now. So we'll be talking to people throughout the disability sector to discuss the unique problems the Pandemic is creating for the sector and keep the conversations happening through these times. You can find the video for this episode at teamdsc.com.au

Evie: All right, here's what's going to happen now.

Roland: Hello, and welcome to our podcast.

Evie: We are DSC. Your turn, you're the boss. Disability Done Different.

Roland: Disability Done Different.

Evie: Candid Conversations. Hope you're ready because we're starting.

Start of Interview

- Roland:** Welcome to Covid Conversations, one of the many pivots that's happening in the disability sector at the moment and around the world. What used to be Candid Conversations will be Covid Conversations for at least the next few months. Welcome to our host Vanessa Toy.
- Vanessa:** Hi, everyone.
- Roland:** And welcome, Libby Mears CEO of Leisure Networks. I just want to quickly explain our relationship with Libby. We've known her for six years, five to six years. Libby was really hot demand and we were one of the people that chased her hard, but in the early days of the trial side of Barwon and getting those lessons from the Barwon trial side, everybody was so eager and you had so many visitors and so many tourists coming through that you almost had to limit the number of tourists coming through, Libby. Welcome, Libby. Can you tell us a bit about Leisure Networks, please?
- Libby:** Thanks, Roland. It's great to see you both again. It was really lovely to think back to those days, actually, because it was just so exciting. Leisure Networks was very small, we had about 20 staff. We've now expanded to about 150. Really in the space of community inclusion. We've also got a team of support coordinators. We work in the financial management space and we've also got really nice innovative SIL model that we're developing. A great team, very enthusiastic bunch of people I work with.
- Roland:** You've diverged a bit in the last three years since we last spoke, but I know that's how where you want to start.
- Vanessa:** Also, there's divergent, but also it also sounds in line with everything you were trying to do before, as well, wasn't it?
- Libby:** Yes, I think that's been our driving mission, absolutely, about connecting, how do people be more connected, whether they're more enabled and more connected, more for.
- Vanessa:** Libby, I wanted to start just by checking in, how are you going at the moment at Leisure Networks in this outrageous time?
- Libby:** Wow, what an amazing time. I cannot be more proud of the team that I have. Resilient, adaptive, creative, really working well under these circumstances. We have some people working in a couple of the offices in a very safe way, where their work can't be done outside, but the majority of the team are working at home. I'm really interested in how our front-line guys are going because I think that's where the rubber hits the road at the moment. Finger on the pulse every day, but feeling...
- Roland:** No big layoffs?

Libby: No, we're working really hard to keep things moving. We've had a downturn for some of our casual support workers. That would be the main area, particularly uni students, for sure, yes.

Roland: One of the reasons we're most excited to talk to you about what was going on and why you're highest on our hitlist was your emphasis three and four years ago on culture. You talked about, and I still remember it, wanting to make sure that people were able to respond to the unknown. The unknown three and four years ago was the emerging NDIS, and we thought that was a really difficult situation, little did we know what a really difficult situation looks like. We wanted to ask you, were we all banging on, because we all were banging on about the same things, has that worked out for you, your emphasis on culture now that the rubber has hit the road?

Libby: Yes. I'm obsessed. Just like today, I have a relentless pursuit of culture and it is just not negotiable. How that has helped us over the seven years is, is just to recruit amazing people. Like, we just have this incredible team. I know all CEOs believe that because you're so passionate about the people that we support, we do great work. Absolutely, Roland, it has been something that has enabled us to pivot, to be flexible, to think differently, to be comfortable with uncertainty. All of the things that are absolutely utmost now, our people and how they respond to this is kind of just the day-to-day. Now saying it's not hard, though, because this is big and how people respond outside their day-to-day work can be really different depending on their own personal circumstances.

Vanessa: What are you seeing? What are the most challenging things that are happening?

Libby: Look, I think that even just today, the announcement that school is now going to be home, home schooled for term two. Straight away, I did a video message out to my team through Yama, letting them know this is the messaging and we will be in contact with every parent individually to talk to them about what your individual circumstances look like. Ten minutes after that announcement, I was letting them know, we will touch base. I think everybody needs a personal response.

That varies. Some love the idea of having their kids at home and that balance of keeping their kids with them. Others are going to find that more difficult. I think it also depends on the role that people are undertaking and as I was saying before, frontline workers, this is really big for them. But for support coordinators as well working with people in heightened times of crisis. It feels a lot more like a crisis, just from the service at the moment, for support coordinators. It's an individual response to a common issue. That's what we're trying to take our approach with.

Roland: Can I ask you about the balance? I want to keep on culture for quite a while because I think you're such – of all the quotes I've quoted you about over the years are starting to flood back to me, which is great. I wanted to look up about them and then ask you a question about culture. One of the things, you set the high water ground for me in terms of workforce recruitment and what a workforce strategy should be because my eldest daughter Collette didn't work for us, didn't work in this particular

part of the sector, but her friends on Facebook were saying, "Come work at Leisure Networks." It's like they had no idea of any of the connections. For me, that's the high point of staff recruitment, when you can get your staff voluntarily putting on Facebook, come work here, it's great. That's one of the things that I thought was just amazing about what you were. The other thing you were doing was using technology in a remote way to also support culture. You just mentioned about using Yama, can you talk about how technology is working for you?

Libby: Look, I think technology has been a really great enabler for great cultural outcomes. It does mean that we want people to be comfortable using different technology. Yama has just been like our internal Facebook, which we've used forever. It's been about demonstrating or showing real-life mention in practice, so what does it look like for people we support to be connected? That's been lovely. We use Microsoft 365, so we've got a whole suite of that including teams and teams is just our go-to place. What I love at the moment is, we're just pushing ourselves into new ways of using teams, using it through supporting young people remotely, doing different sorts of support services with them.

Our staff go to technology as a real enabler, but we're still not there, we're still pushing to deliver more and more innovative ways. Our technology has enabled us to be really clear about the face of Leisure Networks, but I think internally when we recruit, we do V-Pool and videos, just to get a feel, get people comfortable, that this is going to be an organisation that wants you to embrace different ways of working. From day one, we do that. It's always – you've got to keep working, you've got to invest in training. You've got to lead the way. I've got to model it really clearly.

Roland: That you always need to strike. What we're seeing is some organisations are really struggling with trusting their workers to work from home, trusting their workers to be more autonomous. We've got a crisis that we've never seen before in our lifetimes and the tendency in crisis like this is to become authoritarian, where are you going?

Libby: Completely. It's never about trusting my staff. I know my people. I know that they will work in the way that they need to work to support the people that they are doing are amazing things for. I need to be the one supporting them and enabling them. That's what I ask of them, tell me how I can support you to be your best. It's never about trust because we have got people who believe so deeply in the work that we do, that I have to make sure they're not burning out, that they're not working too long, that they're actually putting an end to their day and getting balance with their family. That's my focus. How are my people going with their mental health? How are they going with their health and wellbeing? How are they getting outdoors and exercising? How are they managing to cook nutritious meals and get the supermarket shopping done? I'm interested truly in what the whole person looks like, but what the work is being delivered for our customers, but very much what their whole lives look like. That just isn't...

Roland: Yes, this is what we love, Libby, isn't it?

Vanessa: Yes, it's such a long way along the scale. I'm seeing this in the leaders that I'm talking to, too. I wouldn't have said that people have pulled toward authoritarian, but I think you pulled in one director or another, it kind of amplifies what was already happening sometimes, if there was low trust, it's a very difficult time to turn that around.

Libby: I think that there is definitely a different leadership style at different times required. When this first kicked off, March the 6th was our first comes out to our people, so early March now. I remember bringing the leadership team into the boardroom and talking to them about I've got a public health background, I do understand some of them. I talked to them about what this could look like and what it means. I said to them, you might see me being pretty direct and pretty clear and pretty concise in the next week or so because it's so important that we communicate with clarity and give people confidence that we understand that we can manage what we are moving into.

It might feel an unusual leadership style, because that's not usually all the time. That's exactly what we did. We did a bit more command and control. Certainly, that talking to people about what and what that means and then enabling the humanity and the compassion to always be around the edges, as well. I think we did have the flag a different approach and now we're getting into a rhythm and the rhythm is checking in every day. We've got our teams meetings happening. I jump into meetings all the time. It's real. We've got to keep our real relationships and our connections really authentic and be quite vulnerable around that, as well. We all have good days and bad days.

Roland: I just want to summarise a couple of things you said. I'm putting a leadership webinar together and I know Vanessa will take it after I do the summary, but you just summarised three of the key things there saying that you need to do. Be really clear about why you're making decisions, so that you can bring along people with you. Be really honest and empathetic and hold the space for the people, be reassuring to people in the ways that you're making those decisions. Make decisions that are direct when you need to.

Vanessa: Be direct, be directive.

Roland: Yes.

Libby: Yes. I think there needed to be and there still needs to be a single source of truth around what the organization is doing and then a consistent follow-up with our leadership team.

Vanessa: I know you've always been strong on direction and that's just almost you've got to double down on that a bit at the moment, don't you?

Libby: Yes, I think you do. Only for a point in time. One of the things we've really had lots of chats around the leadership team is, okay, we said something two days ago,

that's changed. That's changed because we've changed and we're responding to stage one, stage two, stage three, stage four now today. Helping people know that what we say today is what we say today. We're going to change the message when we need to. We're going to communicate it quickly, so that you know what it means for you. Yes, so really quickly pivoting to this next phase and then the next phase. I think that's why the first three weeks were so exhausting because there was so much change.

Vanessa: Libby, I want to check in with how you're going. I mean, this is a big time for a CEO of an organization. What's supporting you at the moment?

Libby: Well, a great team, so I've really got a great team. It's not a solo job here at all. I've got a great life, as well. We've recently just moved to a farm, literally at the end of January. Just as all of this happened. I live now on a hundred acres in a beautiful part of the world. That probably is helping me get some energised time. To just step outside into nature, which is just outside the door. That's a privilege, an absolute privilege to have that space. I think that there is something about being able to lead strongly that is energizing and I enjoy that. I think my time in local government, there's always the crisis in local government, but I did manage the times through the Black Saturday, in the surf coast shire, very high risk. I just remember the feeling of what people want to see, just calm, confident, clear leadership. Which is responding quickly. I feel like that's something that I slip into so that we don't need to have that style all the time, but I can slip into it and I'm also supported by great people, really strong, supportive...

Vanessa: Yes, you can hear how you can slip into it. Part of my question is also how you sustain that and manage also to slip out of it again. That's what happens, we get stuck there.

Libby: Yes, I think we're at a point where I can step back a bit and the leadership team can step up. We've got a crisis response team, that's myself and the head of culture, that's an amazing really supportive little duo, really, but the other leadership team members, as well. We're all stepping in and out as people need. I take time out, like the other day, I said, I'm just going to take the afternoon off and really just down tools. I encourage others to do that, too. When I talk about my people's mental health and wellbeing and being in balance, I've got to model that, as well. Just saying, look, I actually feel a bit overwhelmed and I'm going to just have a couple of hours out. That's been comfortable with vulnerability. That's being comfortable to say, yes, I need a little break and we encourage everyone. I think that helps people feel connected because everyone feels vulnerable at these sorts of times. We should show that, so we can be supported.

Roland: That's true. It sounds like you're giving a master class in communication. One of the things I think a lot of leaders will be wondering is, the frequency of communication, can they communicate too much at the moment?

Libby: Yes, I think it is interesting and we're starting to talk about we started off with really high-level messaging and now I think it's actually coming down to the personal messaging and what it means for each individual, and the mechanism for messaging. We're doing video chats and team checking that are now just a bit more personal, a bit more connected. I think you've got to communicate the right message at the right time, to the right audience. Cutting the segments again out of frontline support workers, they really need to know we are doing absolutely everything to make sure they're safe.

We're talking to them in a slightly different way to our support coordinators, for example, who are needing to be supported and connected to buddy up around some of their crisis managing and working in partner so they can debrief when they need. I don't think you can over message, but I think you need to be clear and communicate the right message for the right people. We're also doing a lot of checking in. We have an amazing platform we use 'Culture Amp' That's surveying our people pretty regularly around their pulse, how are they feeling? That's giving us the data to help tailor our response to support people.

Roland: One of our consultants recently said she is so busy creativity has gone out the window. I know you're smart enough to handle a complex double-barrel question, so I'm going to do that, is it still a time where we can foster creativity both in ourselves and the people we work with. The things that are changing now that you want to keep when Covid goes away?

Libby: God, yes, it is my passion at the moment. In fact, we've got a hashtag for it because this is absolutely the time to learn and grow and shine. We've got a hashtag, DWAC, D-W-A-C, which is don't waste a crisis. What are the ideas?

Roland: That's so cool, you're a real leader, Libby.

Vanessa: Have you got a copyright on that before we use that?

Libby: You know what? It came from one of my board members who said, "Don't waste a crisis." I thought, I love that. I started thinking about it. Now, we've got #DWAC ideas. One of the things we're trying out now that we want to think about carrying on with, what are the opportunities we're taking now that we've all got just different ways of working that we want to progress things that we haven't been able to. #DWAC is really something we do as a leadership team pretty regularly. What are people coming up with, what are people seeing?

Roland: What are you seeing, Libby? What are a couple of the top things that you're seeing?

Libby: Yes, well, probably one of the things is that technology, really pushing technology out into our frontline workers. We've been using teams pretty well, but not necessarily with our support workers. Getting all of our support workers online, on teams, doing our on call through teams, not just through phones. Technology has been a very big driver. That's been fantastic. Testing structures, so tossing up the

inclusion support team, team leader structures and separating out a few different team dynamics so that there's alignment around people's skillset. Again, some of those things might just stay in place. I think it's up for grabs, I think that's what I want to energise our people with because yes, we can get a bit tired with the work, but you always get energised with new ideas and new things that are working, so to flip it. It's just a perspective thing, really, isn't it?

Vanessa: It's wonderful. I bet there are things you've had to stop doing or you found yourself not stop doing that you're questioning; do we even need to go back to those?

Libby: Absolutely. In fact, I actually feel quite awful saying it, we have expected, people, some of our leaders in Melbourne to travel. Like, how embarrassing is that? Never again should we do that it's a waste of time, four hours in a car, goodness gracious. Really getting rid of all of that stuff, have to say, the board meetings were pretty good online. I enjoyed them a lot and think that from a board perspective, there was really great engagement, something about teams is you have to think about when you're going to speak, because you're not speaking over each other. People speak with purpose and listen. I think it's making, if you're chairing them well, for really good meetings, as well.

Vanessa: That's interesting, so better meeting conduct in a way. We all have to share responsibility in making it work.

Libby: I think we do.

Roland: It's a level playing field, isn't it, that the people from country areas who previously had problems participating are now on the same playing field as everybody else.

Libby: Absolutely, I heard Ed say that and it's completely true. Yes, completely. It's a very good level playing field for sure.

Roland: Speaking about level playing fields, last time three years ago you talked about your concerns about people further out in the areas that you work in that don't have access to public transport, there's some pretty shitting public transport in some of your spaces. Are you worried about them at the moment?

Libby: Yes. Look, that was one of the first thing we did, was stop all access to public transport and just get people in cars and using our fleet and – because there is actually very difficult public transport if you're in Port Arlington or in Dentsington. They may have generally caught the bus in and had a support shift, so are asking us now to go out to them. That is tricky, trying to navigate what individual support might look like, and the sense of how do we make it work? I think that this particular crisis can potentially exacerbate some of those inequities and some of those challenges for people. That's where we're just thinking differently. We did have some things that from a couple of young guys that just said, "Even if I could just talk to someone for an hour over the phone. That will be really important for me. I don't need to see them face-to-face." Hearing what customers are thinking will add most

value to their lives and most support to their needs is really important. We're doing these check-ins, we created a role, a wellness check coordinator. Her role is to check in with customers every day and with staff every day. You get great information when you take the time to listen to what people need. Hopefully, we adjust.

Roland: We're getting mixed message about what's happening in the sector and I wonder if you can help us. You were going to ask the same question; do you want to go?

Vanessa: No, you go, and then I'll ask a different one.

Roland: Okay. We're hearing two sets of things; one is that there's a need for an enormous amount of new staff because people are concerned and they're not calling into work. Then the other one we're hearing is, no, a lot of families and a lot of people are saying, we don't want new staff in our home, we only want trusted, reliable people that we know. We're in fact not needing new staff in the sector and we're laying some of the less experienced and engaged and networked people off the books. Across the sector, do you have any better information or any...?

Libby: Look, I am part of a big CEO group which is catching up regularly, Fridays. It does seem varied and it does seem to be dependent on the programs that they deliver. I'm feeling desperately sad for some of the providers who have got a day program type model that feels very difficult, in a very difficult space.

Roland: There's a real opportunity for them to pivot, isn't there? That's what you'd be saying. I bet you can't hold your tongue.

Libby: Well, it is certainly but that's hard, isn't it? It's hard to do at a time when people, support workers particularly may feel vulnerable about what does it look like? What does my work now look like outside a setting that I'm confident and comfortable in? I think every organization is going to have their own challenges, but for me, the second one that you suggested, where kind of just laying – not laying off, but no rostering our casuals who weren't necessarily working regularly and keeping very much the people who were confident and engaged with our customer our customers are also going through an interesting phase, where many stopped and just said, "No, nothing for the moment." But now are really needing support. Feeling like there is, yes, this is the long-haul and that just being at home without being able to be supported to do some things is very difficult for them. We're seeing a bit of a change, I think.

Vanessa: Yes. What's keeping you awake at night at the moment?

Libby: Probably our frontline support workers. How to keep them fairly confident to continue their critical work? They are doing really important work, supporting vulnerable people. I want them to do that with a level of confidence that we've got their back and we are aware of how challenging that might be. That's just I think probably for anyone who's got people that are right out into the front-line, working

in the community and in people's homes or meeting people and trying to take them shopping or take them to a medical appointment. They are a group, my people that I'm interested in. Then also the other side, I have support coordinators and really complex lives that they're working through, supporting.

Vanessa: They always carry a lot on their shoulders and at the moment.

Libby: They sure do.

Roland: They'll be pretty pleased to see the decision to free up Core then.

Libby: Awesome. Great decision. That was a great decision. Well done, NDIA.

Roland: Freeing up all the support coordination.

Vanessa: If we just go back to the frontline workers for a moment because I share those concerns. What does having their backs really look like at the moment?

Roland: Yes, great question.

Libby: Yes, so I think our appointment of a wellness check coordinator was the first – well, we'd done many things, but this was something we'd just done over the last week. It's a person who's a previous support worker, but she's also a nurse who really understands great infection control practice and understands what the work looks like. She's checking in every day with staff around how they're feeling. The general question around how are you, your mental health, as well as your physical health and particularly making sure that they have a chance to express any concerns about any of the shifts that they're rostered onto any of the environments that they might be in that they are just feeling need someone to go and do a risk assessment for them.

We do risk assessments obviously for all of our in-home support. Just that very regularly about the practice day-to-day doing your work. That gets elevated and escalated very quickly if there are any concerns. That's been a really good appointment and a good response, but we're still asking them what else do they need? It's slightly different for each of them. I think today's announcement around schooling at home is going to change people's perspective about how much work they can do. Things change regularly, we just have to keep asking people what it is that they need today and then tomorrow.

Vanessa: Partly, what they need is that responsive, really close and regular connections and support?

Libby: Yes, I think so. They've got to be connected more than ever now.

Vanessa: Yes.

- Roland:** Libby, I want to finish up with a historical question. It's another quote I used to use from you that in the early days, so we're back in 2016/2015, I would quote you as saying that you spent several hundred thousand dollars on – you worked very hard with your board, to say the NDIS is going to cost money. You go the okay to invest several hundred thousand dollars, which would have looked like a very red bottom line for 18 months or 12 months. I remember I'd talk in large groups and sometimes I'd edit myself and not say it because then someone would say, "She's a crazy woman. That's insane, you can't spend money like that." How's that worked out for you investing so big so early?
- Libby:** I barely even remember it, Roland, so there you go. We've grown from 1.8 to I think we'll be up to about 8. – well, we'll have to do a reforecast now, but you know, up in the 8s, so we have grown year-on-year. Both in terms of revenue and we've been able to retain a surplus, which was really important to enable us to keep reinvesting in our people. The reinvestments are always around quality and always around training and always around the staff requirements. We're doing a really interesting piece of work now around technology, though, so taking ourselves even further out to enable great customer experience, improved efficiencies and connection across all business.
- We want technology just as a platform to deliver a new business model. We're just about to launch our TED 2025 strategy, which TED stands for transform, excite, deliver 2025. We're still on track to do that and this will pass. This will pass. We've got to manage this for the moment, but we can't stop thinking about the future because the NDIS is just such an important transformation for our country and it's delivering such important outcomes. We're going well. Thank you.
- Roland:** You're a phenomenal role model, a super model for our industry, you've been fantastic, Libby. Thank you so much for giving us your time.
- Vanessa:** Yes.
- Libby:** Yes, thank you, it was wonderful to see you again.
- Roland:** It's great to get this out really quickly because the advice you're offering is contemporary, just needs to be out there in the market and people listening to it. I'm sure they'll appreciate it.
- Libby:** There are many people doing great things, I'm just privileged to be in this space, to be honest. Thanks, guys.
- Roland:** You're doing great, thank you, Libby.
- Vanessa:** Thanks so much, Libby.

End of Interview

Outro

Maia:

You've been listening to DSC's featured series Disability Done Different: Covid Conversations with Libby Mears from Leisure Networks. And remember you can watch the video for this episode at teamdsc.com.au. And while you're there you might also want to check out Roland's interview with NDIA CEO Martin Hoffman or last week's interview with the amazing and very funny comedian Tim Ferguson.