

Conversations on Leadership: Sue Tranka

Molly

Thank you for joining us. I'm your host, Molly, and for this episode I'd like to welcome Sue Tranka. Sue Tranka was appointed as the chief nursing officer for Wales, and nurse director of NHS Wales in the summer of 2021. She was formerly the deputy chief nursing officer for patient safety and innovation at NHS England and Improvement, and held the role of Director of Infection Prevention and Control, leading the national team in its response to supporting guidance development, implementation and re mobilization of NHS services.

Sue has 31 years of varied experience in nursing, and has spent the last 24 years working in the National Health Service. Sue trained as a midwife, registered general nurse, mental health nurse and community nurse. Sue has a strong interest in quality improvement, human factors and safety systems.

Thank you so much for joining us Sue. So to begin with if it's okay I'd like to ask you some quickfire questions for our listeners to get to know you a bit better. What was the last book that you read?

Sue

Oh wow, what a great question. So, I do love I do love reading. I read everything from fiction to nonfiction.

I'm trying to think of what was the last. I think the last book was the audiobook I listened to. I do a lot of audio listening, simply because I travel a lot, and I don't have time to pick up a book. So the last one I did was the autobiography of, it's called 'Finding Me' by Viola Davis. So that's the list of all the books I've been listening to in the last couple of months.

But that is one of my, it's my favourite book. It's, autobiography called 'Finding Me' by Viola Davis. And she's an actress. And she's a really interesting actress. If you followed her and her life and her life is a, her life story is one of, real difficulty and inequality. And having grown up in the toughest of circumstances, but, despite it all, I guess finding some success and but maintaining and holding on to her roots.

And so I guess I, I, I identify in some way. Yeah. And so it's why I loved it so very much. It's not a book for the faint hearted though, I will warn you.

Molly

It's definitely going on my to read list now! What was the last thing that you learned?

Sue

The last thing that I learned. So I've been through a very tough time recently. Work related. And I learned that despite thinking and feeling that I'd built so much resilience in my lifetime. And all of my life's experiences, I had a ton of resilience. I realized I really don't.

And I've learned that you have to lean in and lean on people sometimes, and simply because you're in a leadership role that holds so much difficulty and challenge does not mean you can do this alone all the time. So I've learned to lean in more into other people and accept help.

Molly

Yeah. And kind of related to that, what is your greatest strength?

Sue

Oh, my greatest strength. So I'm, I think I'm quite a visionary around what I, where I would like to get to. So I think my greatest strength is envisioning futures that look and feel different and really meet the needs of the people I'm trying to serve.

And then I think I can translate that into what I need to do in order to get there. So I think that's my greatest strength, in the workplace anyway. I probably have different strengths, my husband would say something completely different at home.

Molly

Well, linked to that, then, I assume, is what motivates you?

Sue

Oh, gosh. I've been deeply, deeply motivated. From being a kid, I think, in doing the right thing, I've grown up in, circumstances that have. I've always seen the impact of, inequality. I've seen the impact of, injustice. I've seen the impact of unfairness. And so what motivates me is just that. So working, living, doing things for the right reasons, in the right way, has always been the thing I wanted to do.

So any job I do, irrespective of the job description, I will constantly ask myself whether I'm doing it, what's the reasoning behind it? And if I'm doing it for the right thing. And right now in this job, I'm doing it whatever I do for the people of Wales. So I serve the population, despite working in Welsh Government, I serve the population. And so every question is, am I doing this for the right reasons?

Molly

And lastly, on this kind of question, what profession other than your own would you like to attempt?

Sue

Oh, goodness, that's a big question isn't it? So I love being a nurse. This this profession has been the very best profession that I could have come into. And I've had a choice to go into many different things, and I've chosen not to.

I've gone and studied at medical school, and I've come back to be a nurse because I absolutely love it. So it's a very difficult question when you ask me, what else would I do? But if I were to absolutely choose something, it would be something that gives back again to communities. Yeah. So anything that could support and build stronger communities for the future, it would be in that realm, I suspect.

Molly

Well, thank you for answering those. It's really interesting to know a bit more about you personally. I have a couple more, but I'll come back to those at the end. So as I mentioned in your bio, you have 24 years of experience working in the NHS. Which must come with a whole catalogue of challenges, but also rewarding experiences.

And based on that, this episode's theme is leading with your head and your heart. So what does it mean to lead with both your head and your heart? And why is it important in today's organisational landscape?

Sue

So let me start with why I think it's important in today's landscape. So I think the expectations, and the environment we work in currently is really tough.

And I think it's tougher than it has been a decade or so ago. I think the current labour climate, is an employee market with many options and multiple competing offers. So our workforce needs caring for. They won't put up with toxic cultures. They won't put up with environments that, don't value them any longer.

So I think if you don't think about leading with heart and mind, I think you, people, you will lose your people. And we see some of that happening at the moment. We've got a really tough, economic environment currently money, money and accolades and benefits alone will not, will not address the problem. And I think you can throw money at it even though we don't have enough of it.

It just won't address the problems of people staying with you or leaving you. So you've got to create cultures where people and employees want to work with you. They understand the purpose of an organisation. They want to be recognized for what they bring. They want to trust the leadership they work with. They want the leadership to understand them.

So today's environment is deeply complex and more so there's an expectation of our younger generations that just won't put up with what generations prior to us put up with. So I think it's really easy for leaders to set regulations and rules and policies and guidance, but taking people with you, getting them to understand and then want to follow you and want to do the thing that you set out, is where the minds piece comes in I think. So that's the today's culture.

How do I lead? How do you lead with, hearts and minds? I think you've just got to connect both. You've got to do the emotional intelligence, which is really, really important. You've got to know that the people you work with, those that you lead, how you provide services, you've got to bring them together.

For me, I take a people-centred approach. I take an approach that that puts people at the heart of what I'm trying to do. And I think if I can continue to enable that level of thinking for me, my teams, the leaders I work with, then I think what you do is you bring your the heart and mind together.

There's a bit more of a complexity behind this. People who are mind-centred. And I think Julia Unwin will put it quite well, she talks about the if anyone's seen the two lexicons of public policy, she talks about the rational, lexicon and then the relational lexicon. And when I've seen that, I've gone, oh, that's my heart and mind.

So some of us will step more into the logical, analytic, data driven space and utilize that as a mechanism to lead. And whilst it's good you can't do that without the relational stuff. You've got to be kind. You've got to bring compassion. You've got to care about the people you work with, what matters to them first is, I think of the, should be your priority in understanding how you work with that and with what matters to people in order to drive the data the evidence, the utilization of information.

And I think leaders have a bit of a job, and we do, we're learning all the time to balance the rational and the relational sides of, of public policy or anything we do. It's not always been easy to do that. but you learn, I think, through your leadership journey, and you learn and you get to understand, but without the hearts, you can do the mind all you want, it simply doesn't work.

Molly

Can you share an example from your own experience, where leading with your head and your heart resulted in a particularly impactful decision or outcome?

Sue

Yeah. Look, I think there's been so many over the years, but, you know, if I take an example of, what we've currently been doing, even at Welsh Government, and I'll take a recent one around the maternity safety strategy.

So we've got a plan, around maternity and neonatal safety support programme. And it came from a place of concern and worry, as it normally does with data suggesting, you know, things are not going in the direction we needed to around women from ethnic minority backgrounds. And so my interest in maternity safety has always been around, the disparity in the delivery of care that we offer.

So I've been interested in that. And sharing the data hasn't been enough for people to take notice. Yeah. So I've had to have a different approach. And the different approach around the heart, I think, has been engaging our communities and our diverse communities. And so I asked you know, what does it feel like as a brown woman to have a baby today in our maternity services in Wales? What does it feel like as a black woman to experience care?

And they told me all the things that I probably knew, but I didn't need to hear it myself. I wanted those around me to hear. And so what we did is we engaged the hearts of those around you with the, with the message, with emotion, but bit of sensitivity. Because it's hard stuff to share.

And people shared, the communities we worked with shared with us, look as a black woman I'm disbelieved when I tell you I'm in pain, you know, the expectation is that I can tolerate this. And why? Because I'm just like you. I just have more melanin than you have. You know, and when, as a brown woman, I'm two and a half times more likely to have a stillbirth when I come into.

Why should that be the case for me? I don't want it to be the same for me, nor do I want it to be the same for my daughter. So people said this to us and there's no better, I think, moment when you're trying to move people in a direction of change, when you hear from those who are experiencing this, and, or I suppose the disparity in care or the, the prejudices and the discrimination they've experienced.

And so I didn't have to push very hard after that, because initially I was going in with the data. The hard data. And having allowed the community, the working community here in Welsh Government to listen to the community who are experiencing this,

people went well it's a no brainer. We should be we absolutely should be supporting and funding and investing in the big safety support programme.

And now we are, we've got a big safety support programme. We've had funding two years in a row on the programme. We've got an anti-racist Wales action plan, dedicated support officer that works with us. She's been appointed and she leads the work for neonatal. So babies who are jaundiced who were treated differently and missed because they're brown. You can't always see the yellowing of the skin.

And she leads the work for maternity. So we connected the pathway. We connected the work, we got the funding, and now we're leading a programme of safety. So. So that for me, is where hearts and minds come together and help you to move big pieces of work like this that people don't normally want to hear about, because it is quite a sensitive topic as well.

But if you do it in the right way, I think and get the right people around and you engage the hearts, I think the minds will, it just simply followed didn't it. So that's been really impactful for me so far, and I'm really keen to see where we get to with the improvement in outcomes in the next couple of years.

Molly

Thank you so much for sharing that.

In an ideal world, leaders and organisations would always strive for a balance between logic and compassion. But it's not always the case in high pressured organisations or data driven organisations. So what strategies can leaders use to cultivate a culture within their organisation that values both logic and compassion?

Sue

Yeah, that's a good question. Look, I think I think they're both really important, logic and compassion. But I think you've got to think about how you, how you generate momentum around this.

I think I'm reminded by John Maxwell's quote. What does he say? No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care. And you shouldn't be underestimated that quote, because it is exactly true.

And as a leader of many, many years, I will tell you that this comes to bear. When people don't know how much you care, they really don't care how much you know.

So start with caring about your team. I would start there. Start with the people that you serve. The people you work with truly care about your team.

I think connect with people emotionally. From your ideas to, your position, who you are, what you do, connect with them on a personal level. Of course, you don't need to know their personal life, that's not what I mean, but connect on a personal level where you have something that you are both interested in, and connect with them so that you understand where they're coming from and what they need.

You know, understand their fears, their worries, hear their ideas. Don't be afraid, as a leader, to hear people's ideas in the room, even if it's the youngest person in the room, they'll have a better idea than you, you can bet your bottom dollar on it. Give them a space to hear them, allow them to be able to share that.

The other thing for me is always assume good intent with your team, always assume good intent, and then look for opportunities when even when things go wrong, look for opportunities to support them, grow them, build them, develop them. And when things go wrong, do you know what, have your team's back. So I can't emphasize this enough.

You know, have your team's back, because delivery will fall short now and then. But don't throw people under the bus. Have your team's back, front it up for them as a leader. And then I think that other things that happen around clear communication, you know, as a leader, you should listen to understand, you should clearly communicate your route, your direction, your vision, your strategy, the direction of travel.

And the thing for me, I think I've learned, is to build a psychological safety, trust, competence, empathy. If you don't build psychological safety in your team, they won't tell you when you're going wrong. They'll let you fall off a cliff, quite frankly. So yeah, got to build psychological safety where they can challenge you. And I'm a leader who will welcome challenge.

But equally I will bring challenge. I welcome support from my team and equally I will bring them high support. So I always work in a high support, high challenge environment. So my teams that work with me will tell you. And through that I build I build trust, I build psychological safety. I don't always get it right, but I'm also happy to be told when I don't get it right. So that I can fix it.

And I think the other things is that you, you should always support data, understanding, logic, evidence, research. I come from a science background. Of course. I'm interested in the evidence. I'm happy to be led by that. But equally, I need teams that can take the evidence and tell a story with it.

So don't just lay the data in front of me. Tell me the story of the data and where we where you want to get to, compel me to want to follow you so that I can invest in your policy. I can invest in your piece of work. And I encourage this with my team. So I

think I've learned the art of storytelling over my time as a leader, and it is compelling, and it does grip people.

And they will want to be want to follow you. It will align to their purpose. They align to your purpose. And then at the heart of all of this is be a leader despite logical compassion. Whichever one you're bringing and when you're bringing both your values are really important. Do not stray away from your values, but know your values as a leader.

People talk about values. I'm not sure how many of us truly spend time introspecting and work out well what is my value? When I say I'm honest, of course we're all honest. But what does that value mean to me? How do I then operate as an honest leader? How do my teams know I'm honest? What do I bring that shows them there's honesty and integrity?

I think values have become a set of words rather than a behaviour. So convert your values into behaviours and live them every day. Because this is hard stuff. Right, it's not, you can't just do it for once. You've got to live this every single day as a leader. So yeah, I think those are some of the strategies I've used that's worked for me anyway.

Molly

Oh that's amazing. Thank you. My final question is what advice would you give to emerging leaders who aspire to lead with both head and heart in their own leadership journey?

Sue

So I think I would say start with the basics. I think your own leadership style is really important. I think if you don't know yourself as a leader, you cannot lead others.

And the hard work goes into you. So to be the very best version of yourself every day as a leader, you've got to do the hard work. So be introspective. Ask curious questions about what does it feel like to be on the other side of me? What does it feel like to be led by me? And you get some really tough answers, but be prepared for it.

That's okay, because that's the space where growth happens. That's the space where you can step into it, because there are two options - you can walk away as a leader and go, they know nothing what they're talking about, I know best. Or you can go, gosh, that's been tough to hear. But I want to be better today. I want to be better tomorrow.

So I'll step into that. I'll lean into that space and I'll understand what they're trying to tell me, and I'll work on it. Yeah. That's right. I think that you need to understand what the quality of your relationships are. What do you want them to be? I often say this, you're not at work to make friends with people, but you're here to be friendly, kind and compassionate.

There's a distinct difference. And I think leaders sometimes step into those and over those boundaries. So I think you should try and work on that. Secondly, I think persuasion is an essential skill in a leader. So effective leadership, I think you know in particular means being able to win hearts and minds. You've got to convince people that you, that they'd want to follow you. Why else would they follow you?

So unlike influence, persuasion doesn't depend on status of authority because that comes with influence. You know, I've learned you cannot browbeat people or someone into agreeing with you. They simply won't. Instead, it's about encouraging and persuading people, enabling them to understand there is wisdom in your perspective. There is wisdom and understanding in the thing you're trying to do.

You're not simply trying to take people down a route because it's the thing that works for you today. You need to help people understand that. But you've got to be compassionate. You've got to be genuine. So authenticity about who you are as a leader is really, really important. You can't, this stuff you can't bluff. People will see it over time.

So if you if you're kind and compassionate work on that, build it, utilize it, build trust with it I think. Act with integrity always. Even when your integrity is tested and it is tested as leaders, we'll, you know it will be, but act with integrity. Keep your promises, speak on what you believe is right and others will soon follow.

I often speak truth to power, sometimes at personal cost. I wouldn't advise, I wouldn't advise that that's the right thing to do. But I will speak truth to power. I would say to leaders, know what you want. And then build a firm relationship around that.

And I'd say you need to have a unique vision for what it is you're trying to do for your people, your teams, your organisations, and wider. Because this helps to take your team on a journey with you.

And I'd say clarity in your message is really key. Don't forget to appreciate your team along the way. My biggest lesson, I think, through my entire leadership journey has been the people I appoint around me, are critical to the success of my team and then critical to my success as a leader. Nothing I do is about me.

Everything I do is about the people around me. Because if I've got great people together and jointly, we, you know, we're relishing our success. And they make me look like a really good leader and they really do. They make me look like a good leader. So I'm ever so grateful to the wonderful team I have. And if you don't look

after them, you don't appreciate them and you don't allow them to flourish and spread their wings. You won't be the leader that they need.

And it becomes really, really tough to stop and reset and start again because you will need to, otherwise it won't go well. And lastly, I want to say just to my last point, it's it really isn't all about you as a leader. So remember that. It's not about you. This is about the people we are leading.

This is about the people that we are leading for. So remember to not focus all of your actions and all of the things you do about making it about you. If you make it about your team and you allow them to be their very best, they will deliver for you, you know, 100 times over. So those those are the things I think I would say. I am a firm and fair leader.

I really am. I'm a kind, compassionate, firm and fair leader. So you kind of know where you stand with me. I am not afraid to have the tough discussions, and that's where my compassionate leadership comes in. I do the tough stuff in a really human way. Because I'm aware they're human beings at the end of this. This is not about processes. This is about people. And you've got to learn to love the people.

Molly

Thank you so much for all of your stories, ideas, and advice today. Before we end, I'd just like to ask a few more quickfire questions, if that's okay. Do you or have you ever played a musical instrument?

Sue

Oh, I have, I've played a number of musical instruments, all very badly by the way. Absolutely. I've tried the recorder, the flute. I've played. I was best at the triangle. That thing that you just tap every now and then out of sequence so people think yeah, she's making a contribution.

But I have tried everything. I've got very long fingers so I've played the piano for a little while. Not very well. But I've tried it all, so yes.

Molly

What is your favourite type of food?

Sue

Oh, gosh. So I love food, that's the bottom line. So I'm a real foodie. I spend a lot of time working out which restaurants I'm going to eat in. Yeah. And, a lot of time trying not to cook. So that's the key. My favourite food of all time would be seafood. I think.

I come from South Africa, and I, so I think seafood is the, is my favourite food, and but food in general is, if it's tasty I will eat it.

Molly

What is your favourite noise?

Sue

Favourite noise? That's an interesting question. I don't know, I have no idea.

Molly

Not a lot of people have thought about this one before! It's not a very common one.

Sue

What does that mean? What's your favourite noise Molly?

Molly

Oh mine is very specific. So most people say like the sea or like the birds. But have you ever seen the film Ratatouille?

Sue

Yes, I have.

Molly

There's a scene in it where he cuts this, like, really crusty bread, and I can't even explain why, but it just scratches an itch in my brain, and it's the perfect sound for me.

But you can go broad. You don't have to be as specific as that!

Sue

I like that, I do like that. That speaks to food, so it makes me happy. I don't know what my favourite noise is. I often, like to listen to what's, you know, for sleep, you listen to the sound. Yeah. Wind?

Molly

The white noise?

Sue

The white noise. So I listen to that sometimes on an evening just to kind of unwind and take my brain away. I don't know if it's my favourite. It just simply works for the moment. It helps me to sleep, and, yeah, helps me to kind of take all the stuff away that's in my brain that's keeping me awake. So. But I'll think about that one.

Molly

Yeah, we could come back to it. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Sue

Oh, gosh. So I'm definitely a morning person. I can be up at the crack of dawn every day, consistently jump out of bed, spring in my step, get going. And then by 4:00, I'm like, you have to resuscitate me literally.

Yes. And by 9 p.m., no one will see me. I'm usually in pyjamas.

Molly

Oh that's the way to be!

Sue

And need to be in bed. In this job, I work much later into the evenings because I want to read papers and do research and stuff like that, but I'm really not a night owl. I often will make plans with friends and say, yeah, I'll meet you at 8 and you can bet your bottom dollar.

Molly

And they know!

Sue

I'm in pyjamas I'm not going out. There's no way I can go. I mean, so yeah, not my kind of thing.

Molly

And my last question is, if you could have one superpower, what would it be?

Sue

I'd love to be invisible. So I love people watching. Yes. That's my favourite pastime is to sit with a cup of coffee on holiday, even at a table.

Just watch people. I just I'm, I'm totally inspired by how they behave. How they. Yeah, yeah. Wonders of people hand in hand. Children. I love just people watching. Watching how the joy, I think, so I think I'd love to be invisible. And just to, yeah, be an interloper and observe what people are like. So, I think for that purpose and not for anything evil really, it would all be for good!

Molly

No, that's a really good one. Again, thank you so much for joining us. I hope you've enjoyed the experience.

Sue

Oh, it's been brilliant. Thank you ever so much. Thank you. Molly.

Molly

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