

## Transcription - Rodney Watson Part 1

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Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and today we're talking with Rodney Watson, OAM. Rodney, Fulyana and I worked together last century. We worked together during the 1980s. They're trying not to laugh. I haven't seen Rodney for over 10 years. Fulyana hasn't seen Rodney for probably over 20 years. [LAUGHTER] So it's going to be a great catch up and we definitely have lots of things to think about and talk about. Rodney, of course, was senior management when we were working with him and he neglected to send a bio before we met today, so I'm going to do the introduction without it.

I'll just say that Rodney's worked in a number of different places. He's worked for the public sector, both state and federal level. He's had a business of his own in food services and he's worked in pretty much all states of Australia, I think, at one time or another. But I think it will be interesting to hear from him all sorts of things about career paths and about family-life balance.

Looking at some of the things that you've identified for us are issues for you and your work and your careers, what I want to ask him, first of all, is about the decision, when he was in the private sector, when he had a food service business where he was actually making the food as well, very famous for sausage rolls. We'll add at this point he had a young family and made a choice, made a decision on the basis I recall, being opportunities for the kids, for the family to move from where he was, which is another state, back to into New South Wales, he not from New South Wales originally and go back into the public sector. I'm just interested in the decision and the upheaval and the change and the relative time of when he saw that that was the right decision.

Thank you. I guess that I was in, I had a take away food shop or also eat in, up in Queensland in 1986, '87. And I had that for 20 months but I found one of the most difficult things associated with that is that it was not big enough to employ people. So it was really managed by myself and my wife and with some assistance, from time to time, from her father who used to come in for a couple of hours every second day or so. The difficulty associated with that was seven hours, it was seven days a week and you would finish about 6.30pm at night and then go home and start cooking for the next days operations. And you would be there at 7.30am the next morning to open up and start all over again. At that point in time, the children, we have three children, were attending primary school and it became a very, very difficult thing to manage and balance our family life, particularly with Sharryn, my wife, working in the shop in between pick up, drop off to school. So we took the decision that we would sell the business which we did. And at that time, I had a previous background in experiencing human resource management and was successful actually in obtaining a position with, as human resource manager with a firm in Tweed Heads. But before I started there, after being advised that I was successful for the job, the door was closed. So that was a great start. Back to square one. And then it was necessary to find employment. And in those days, certainly in 1987, on the Gold Coast, there was not much in the way of openings for people with human resource management background in business because there was not a lot of large businesses in the area. Fortunately, I contacted a colleague of mine who was working in Canberra at the time, in my

former department, who then spoke with the administrative head of the department in Sydney. And he rang me and offered me a position with the Department of Housing and Construction to relocate the organization from Sydney city centre to Chatswood.

It was a pretty exciting project to undertake because it entailed developing new conditions of service, doing office layouts and doing a staged move for some, I think, 1400 staff at the time. This was about 12 months in the making. We were fairly well advanced with the arrangements of getting people attuned to the idea that they would be relocating to Chatswood in 1988. For many of the staff moving from the Sydney City CBD to Chatswood was like moving to the country.

So for those of you who don't know Sydney, we're talking about an office and staff that were located right at Wynyard, right in virtually Circular Quay, almost the centre of the business district in Sydney and moving out, on a good drive, probably 20 minutes away, a train trip. For people who were coming from the other direction, it was going to mean an hour plus travel, huge change in logistics for people getting to and from work.

That was all going along swimmingly and then that federal government of the day suddenly announced that they had sold the Chifley Square development to the Bond Corporation. There was a massive upheaval within the public service sector, the Department of Housing and Construction was to be abolished and there would be no move to Chatswood. So there was two out of two. So I found out myself also looking for a job and that came about obtaining an executive management position with the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology organisation, ANSTO at Lucas Heights. I started there in late 88 and stayed there until 98 as Director, Human Resources.

It was a pretty exciting time I suppose. There had been a lot of things that had not been undertaken for many years in terms of management and senior managers being delegated to manage their own areas, things associated with equipment etc. So we made some significant changes there and by 1998 I had almost worked myself out of a job, so I left that position and was offered a position with the local member of parliament as his electorate officer. I started there pretty much straight away and worked with the late Jim Anderson, at the time, right through until the next election in 1995 I think it was, when unfortunately he passed away with a heart attack on the morning of the election. So that caused a bit of a concern and by elections etc and all the rest of it. Notwithstanding, I stayed on with the next local member until March 2011 when I advised him that I would be retiring from work but also I had probably no choice because the government of the day was defeated. And in those circumstances, if the local member is defeated, the staff are automatically out of a job and I guess from there on I then spent more time, considerably more time, with volunteer work.

So I think you moved around quite well between one organisation and another. At the time I worked for you, I learned many many great features and I'm not just saying that but the ones that stand out for me are vision, leadership and people management. To what extent have those skills, qualities, helped you throughout that side of your career?

I think undoubtedly the people management has been one of my greatest strengths, in terms of the fact that if you cannot relate and communicate effectively with people, you don't really have them come along with you on the journey. One of the tragedies, I believe, of modern

technology is the fact that we communicate less. It is only done by text, by email, by whatever and rarely do we talk sufficiently face to face with people so that you can explain to them clearly your vision of what you see is appropriate for the organisation that you work for. But also the other upside to that is you can get great feedback from people because the worst thing you can ever do is surround yourself, as a manager, with people of the same ilk. You need to have people who have differences in points of view and who are able to then bounce ideas off each other, because it's only then that you probably come up with the better and the best things in which to move forward.

In terms of vision, I guess that one of the things for any senior manager is that you always need to be thinking about what you can do or what can be done to improve your organisation. But also when you are thinking outside that square or box is that you need to see what other people are doing. You need to make yourself open that you can turn around and say, "Well they've tried that and that seems to have worked well. That could have been adapted to our base." "Well, they started that and it's been a disaster so we won't go near it." I guess I was a little bit fortunate in some ways.

I first left school and joined the work force, I joined what was, in those days, the PostMaster General's department and of course now is Australia Post.

In those days their rules and regulations were so rigid that you did everything almost by rote. But in doing that I moved around and I went from Adelaide to Port Augusta to Lee Creek in South Australia. Then I was transferred to Alice Springs and from Alice Springs, after a period there, I was transferred to Darwin. My journey to Darwin in those days, or firstly to Alice Springs was by the old mail that took a couple of days to get there.

And then when I transferred from, and this is in the 1960s to Darwin, it was three days on the mail bus.

Wow!

It's just hard, I suppose, for people to comprehend that it was a passenger bus to a point but also that mainly transported the mail.

Where did you stay on the road?

We stayed at, I always remember, Daly Waters and Tennant Creek, so there were the two nights and three days travel.

Great, it sounds like at that time, travel was very rare. Most people have heard of those places but never ever had the chance to see them. But you not only travelled there but worked there as well, which is fantastic.

Well exactly, because Alice Springs was an eye-opener for me because of the, I won't say the climate, but it was a different lifestyle and a different mind set in terms of the customers that we had come into the post office.

And in those days, all within that post office, was the telephone exchange so all interstate calls were done manually and things such as that. So there was such an incredible transition. And when I got to Darwin, it was a whole new world again and quite, I won't say, well it was an eye-opener, is probably the best way of putting it. I was single when I first got to Darwin. In terms of development, the city was developing slowly but probably, in some ways, at that

point in time, was considered to be rapidly developing, but not in terms of today's standards.

Working on the counter, but I also had other duties as I spent more time in Darwin working in the back office, you might say, doing other administrative work etc. Once again the telephone exchange was there and there was a 24 hour service of female telephonists or females in those days connecting calls all over Australia to Darwin etc. Some fun times. I always remember one particular telephonist who was talking to someone in Adelaide and they asked her how she got to work and she told them she rode a kangaroo and she tied it up at the hitching post. And this person believed that. Another one sort of said, "I just leave the crocodiles tied up at the front." And in those days crocodiles were not protected so there were quite a number around. All sorts of funny stories, parts of a journey of life.

If you look at all of that in one grouping, are there elements of what you learnt, of how you work, that you've carried through from those times?

How to deal with people I think was probably the most significant of all.

The number and the types of people that you met came from all walks of life. Not only working with them in their employment but also with the customer, the general public of Darwin in particular, where it was a very transient population, as well as some locals who had businesses and things such as that. But it was interesting when you dealt with the transient population who came in each day, their mail was addressed, care of the post office Darwin, we had a huge bank of mail area for transient people because they had no specific place of abode. It was quite interesting.

It was interesting how to deal with them and share their disappointments of no mail to other things that have happened etc. Yeah, I think certainly that's where the communication has to be, I believe, your first call for anything in a business.

You spent a lot of, well let's say all your career, in people activities either face to face or managing them or all that. Do you ever get tired of it? Do you ever get tired of people?

From time to time, yeah you did. Certainly in Darwin, I originally lived in a hostel where there was hundreds of people staying there and then I eventually rented out in the suburbs where I had greater time to myself.

I found that that was good in that you could still have your down time but then I was involved with sports as well so I spent time as well then, interacting with people outside of the workplace. So you've got a bit of both, but yeah, I really think that from time to time you do need to have that time away because particularly if you get some difficult customers. It's learning how to cope with that abuse without firing back, either reducing yourself to their level or making yourself look stupid by saying things that you should not say. And that was probably one of the most important learning tools that I've got early in my career.

Listening to you, you're talking about how to approach people, how to communicate, get to know your audience, the environment etc. We've got a lot of listeners that are international. So when you look at that, it's the same, it's understanding the culture so if you go to work in another country, it's understanding the culture, you understand the way of thinking and doing things, respecting their customs. That's what you're talking about like in Darwin, even the sense of humour, that would not work anywhere else but again assimilating. That's a good lesson, is whatever you are, people are people, customers are the customer and you're

occasionally going to get annoyed with the customers and you need to re-energise.

That's so true and I think I would say that in any person aspiring into managerial roles, the first thing that you need to do when you working your way along up that ladder, is to sit back and observe, and observe the behaviours of others around you. See what approach you would have in terms of, is that behaviour an acceptable behaviour or does that behaviour need modifying in terms of how they also operate within the office. And I think some of that's probably born within the person, they've got to have a bit of a bent for life, not everyone's going to be in human resource management. Others are going to be the salespersons and all that and they have different sorts of pictures and different sorts of needs. But overall it comes back to one thing, how effectively you can communicate with whatever culture it be and in this day and age of where, particularly within Australia, the multicultural situation having employment in particular is vast.

But it's so critical that we have, whether we like it or not, a clear understanding of where the person that you're talking to is coming from, is real. And that's only by learning, perhaps on the job to a point, their culture and what their culture is also about.

So you did all of this stuff and you retired and then the thing that was your break from work and sport then became your focus.

I guess my segue into sport really started in Darwin in 1965. A friend of mine said, oh we're going to start another hockey club in Darwin. They knew that I'd played hockey when I lived in Adelaide and said, do you want to play? I was only playing tennis at that point in time in Darwin. So I took up playing hockey and in forming the club, I fell into the role of president. I was president, which meant sort of looking after some administrative aspects of things, which was a very fast learning curve. Then I took up some coaching of the Northern Territory Women's team in 1970 and was ultimately made a life member of that hockey club. In 1966 was elected to the position of Honorary Secretary of the Northern Territory Hockey Association and during that time we initiated the process to gain affiliation with the Australian group, the hockey association, so it was really getting into admin governance type issues again.

I have to say I'm struggling with an organisation, I'm working with at the moment. For those of you who are part of organisations outside of your working environment, they do need these structures. They do need these affiliations, they do need to have a business-like approach to the framework for the organisation.

Unless you have good governance, you don't have a good club. It's as simple as that. I was married in 1970 and so for a while I just played sport, I didn't do any admin when we were first married. And that continued for a while on then in 1974, Cyclone Tracey hit and we were relocated. Well I had an opportunity to go back to Darwin, but if I went back, I had to go back by myself and at that point in time we had a six-week-old daughter, Vanessa, and it would have been over 12 months without seeing my wife and daughter. So I chose to relocate to Canberra in the Federal Public Service as a part of Health where I previously worked in Darwin. I played a little bit of sport in Canberra, playing golf. And my wife and I used to take it in turns, I did Saturday, and she was Sunday. Then we had a second and third child, both in Canberra. Then in '85 I moved to Tweed Heads and '87 back to Darwin, back to Sydney and then in '98 I registered my daughters to play netball for St Clair. One

didn't have a team to play in, the other one commenced playing and within one week of the commencement, I was asked to be the team manager. So away we go again.

And from there it really just billowed almost out of control. At the same time I was following my son who played hockey, he previously played. He initially played soccer, but then took up hockey. In 1990 I was asked to be the senior umpire at St Clair Netball Club and I did that for a couple of years. Then in 1992 I took over as president of St Clair Netball Club. And in 1993 I was also approached to be the rep convener of the Penrith and District Netball Association. I was managing those two sorts of things and also managing my work, as executive manager, and then also assisting with my wife in managing the children, in terms of running them to and from training. She did a lot of that because I wasn't home, at that point in time, from work. But then on the weekends we would be sharing the work of driving the children to sport.

Tell us a bit how that felt because, for some people, it's overwhelming. You seem to have an element of enjoyment in doing it. Tell us a bit about that.

You've got to enjoy it. If you don't enjoy it you're done doing it. But for mine, in those days, you just did it because I believe you have if children it's important for them to play sport. It's important, critically important, for them to be outside of the home environment. Now I guess we were a little bit more lucky and I decry this day and age where we have so many latch-key children, sitting inside, playing in front of computers, playing computer games when they should be outside playing sport or playing in the dirt.

In terms of doing that it was also good because when you went to sport and talked about sport you met other people. And so, once again, you developed a network of friends because whenever you relocate from one town to another or something to another, you know no one. You've got to start all over again in terms of building up and having a relationship base with other people. Otherwise you have a very very lonely life, if you have no one outside your own family to communicate with. I think also by doing those sorts of things, it was a great break from being at work using your head all the time, the brain so to speak. Going out and just relaxing in an open environment of watching your children play sport.

Then in 1994 I was approached to stand to be president of the Penrith District Netball Association. That all happened in this really quick time, going from 1992 when I was president of the local club to 94 in the space of less than two years, president of the association which had over three and a half thousand people, players registered, 20 something clubs.

With Penrith, you were there to set the standard in terms of governance and that's one of Kim's original names for a training course she ran back in the 1990s. (It is. I think it's a standard name.) And that's what you needed to do.

In that time from 1994 to 2012, when I had to relinquish the post of Penrith president, I presided over significant growth and infrastructure development because all of that is the role of the president.

For those of you who don't know the geographical area, this is an area where there would be all the established clubs that have been around for a long time plus very new development,

housing developments, young families who hadn't been necessarily involved in sport as children that were now bringing their own children into the sport.

Exactly. And young people and people moving into the area from elsewhere and we were taking girls and the odd boy into netball from age five up. We had different programs which were programs specific for the various age groups. One of the things, once again I get back to governance, was I introduced stronger governance and we reviewed our constitution and we established since then some reward systems. Like the Penrith Service Award which was to recognise those volunteers who did outstanding service for that club, not for the association but at the grassroots level. It is just so difficult, was then but even more difficult now in this day and age, to get people to volunteer but to understand what they need to do for their own clubs. In the 1990s there were more women at home than what there is in this day and age. It is now incredibly difficult, and I understand why, to get long term volunteers into sporting clubs who will stay with that club for a period of time. As well as manage their family, work full time or part time but many have long hours of work, get home, manage their family, put the meals on the table etc and then have time to go to meetings and attend to sport.

It is an incredible balancing life that you need to have and you have to have with those that are married with a partner. They need to have a clear understanding and make sure that they can work in harmony together.

We are going to take a break there in our discussion with Rodney Watson about administration of sports and the comparison with administration in the business world. Please join us for part 2 where we will go on to discover a little bit more about the similarities between the two styles of management. For now I am Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn, we are talking with Rodney Watson and this is Inside Exec.