



From all sides podcast transcript

Episode 18, Christine Mathieson, CEO of EDVOS

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Episode:

IV Thank you for joining us for this episode of, From all sides, a podcast by Cube Group, where we explore the strategic, organisational and human sides of the major issues facing public value organisations in the current world, and particularly the current COVID 19 crisis. Our series focuses on the different ways the COVID 19 pandemic impacts public service leaders and their organisations. And we discuss the ways we can be better prepared to lead Australia through response and recovery.

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Hello, today is October 19th, 2021. Today's conversation is timed just before significant liftings of COVID-19 restrictions, that are coming into effect in Melbourne from Friday. Closely following behind the lifting of restrictions in New South Wales, Victorians will soon be able to recommence much of the personal freedoms we've been missing for some time.

If you are listening to this into the future, Chris and I are still speaking while in a period of lockdown, but close to the end of it. Our conversation today is with Chris Mathieson, the CEO of EDVOS, the specialist family violence service for Melbourne's Eastern Region. EDVOS is a non-government organisation, that provides a range of services to women, their children and their pets, to help them escape family violence, to keep them safe from harm, and to help them recover from the impacts of trauma and abuse.

Throughout the pandemic, family violence experts have been raising the increased risk of harm and abuse that many women face from current or former partners. Rates of family violence are known to rise significantly during national crises. And at the same time, some of the usual avenues to get help and support, are not available due to physical distancing restrictions.

Family violence services themselves are also going through an extraordinary period of change and reform. Rates of domestic violence and demand for their services continue to grow. The pandemic is required extraordinary changes to the way services are delivered. And in Victoria, all this comes on the back of a once in a generation period of reform and growth occasioned by the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

We're very grateful to have Chris with us today, to share what these experiences mean for family violence workers and their organisations. Chris, thanks so much for being a part of this conversation.

IE Terrific to be involved, Tom, thank you.



IV Can we start by asking where you're speaking to us from? What's your remote working setup like and how have you found it?

IE I'm in North Melbourne, an inner city suburb of Melbourne. And have pretty much been working from home on and off, for the last 18 months or so. Looking out the window, it is spring but it's fairly cloudy and gloomy but a bit of glimmer. Melbourne is coming out of its sixth lockdown, later in the week. So, that's given, I think, a lot of hope and optimism for people.

IV We've heard quite a bit, so far about the impact of the pandemic on family violence, particularly the phrase, the shadow pandemic has been used a little bit on the experience of the lockdown and what that's meant for a sharp rise in family violence. Can you tell us a bit about the experience in Victoria? What are you seeing? And as we move forward, what are you expecting to occur as we begin to open up?

IE Yes, it's interesting, isn't it, just that notion of shadow pandemic. And where the origins actually come from because, as we know, in a social media world, some of the thinking around some of these big and tricky social problems, are generated often by the media. Certainly, in Victoria and more broadly across the globe, mental health, I think, through the pandemic has also been seen as a shadow pandemic, as much as family violence. And in fact, they're not mutually exclusive.

But before I answer the question, specifically, I thought it might be relevant to segue with a couple of quotes from Rosie Batty, who many people will be very familiar with, who is an activist and leader in the family violence area. The first thing that she says is that, family violence is an entrenched epidemic that we've lived with since time began, so we've got a long way to go. I do believe the tide has turned, it's no longer a subject that only occurs behind closed doors. I think that is simple but complex in terms of, understanding in our context.

The other thing that she talks about is, I want to tell people that family violence happens to anybody, no matter how nice your house is, no matter how intelligent you are. The third one is what we have to continue to remind ourselves is that violence is a choice. Perpetrators choose to use violence. And once I think our community, individuals and our systems really understand that in a more mainstream way.

And then the final one, and I'll move on to the actual question, but this is about saving children's lives. It's not about agencies and services protecting themselves. And I think that is really poignant, in relation to me running an organisation that is a service provider, in the family violence sector. I've worked in state government here in Victoria, largely in the disability area. And that focus on client at the centre, self-determination, has become really important, pre the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the NDIS. But also, just the preservation of agencies and service providers in the context of self-determination, I think, is a really interesting concept. So, Rosie's comment there, I think is really interesting.

IV As we begin to talk about the relationship between the lockdown and perhaps, some of the incidents of family violence. We can often get into the language that starts to excuse or explain away violence. The additional stressors, for example, or the loss of work, whatever that might be going on. And we find ourselves using language that, comes to excuse what is ultimately, what is a choice that, particularly men, choose to perpetrate violence against women. We do run the risk of having a conversation like this about the impact of lockdown that gets into that language of excuse. It's such a good, timely point, I think.

IE Absolutely and it's twofold, isn't it? Language is so important in change, and particularly in social change, definitely. And even if you use the COVID example, where we were told, and then we were applying



responses related to eradication. Then the language change to suppression. How you use language to influence the community and think about different responses, I think is really interesting. And then as you rightly point out, that comment about choice. A lot of people would not construct, I think, family violence in that regard.

But sort of moving into that concept of the shadow pandemic. So, at EDVOS, which is the organisation that I lead. And we run the services throughout the entire eastern area of Melbourne, which goes into the fringes or deep in the outer east. That's for our funded service responses. But we also do state wide and national primary prevention, education and training programs, as well. We've got a pretty significant reach.

But one of the things that, I think we've really understood and learnt and have been experiencing is that, for women during the pandemic, the responses that they've needed are more complex from a service provider like us, and that the risk that they are dealing with, and managing is actually higher and more complex. There's been a lot, as I started that notion of the media reporting the shadow pandemic, yes, it is absolutely true and real that there had been significant issues.

But what we notice is the spike in referrals or increases comes after lockdowns close off. When restrictions are eased, women and their children are able to move around a little bit more freely and therefore can almost engage with the service providers in ways that they would have pre the pandemic. So yes, there's a spike that we see once a restrictions ease.

Typically, what happens is, we would get a referral from Victoria Police that would come through each morning, incidents that might have occurred. Then they come through to a service provider like us. They have remained steady over the course of the COVID. But as I said, there's a spike as we come out of lockdowns. The complexity of cases, as I said, and the levels of violence and the risk that we're working with are what we've noticed the most.

And our experience at EDVOS and across the state is, consistent with crime statistics generally. We obviously have a very close working relationship with the courts and with Victoria Police. And in fact, we've got a really good line of sight with Lauren Calloway, who is the Assistant Commissioner in Victoria Police, that has the portfolio responsibility for family violence. And it's been really interesting over COVID checking in with her around the policing side of things and what she's seeing as trends and themes. And then at our response and service end.

The other thing, I think, to note is, some of this is obvious. But until it's spelt out, perhaps we don't think about it. But things like, if you're in a lockdown environment, there are even sort of easier, for the want of a poor word, ways for perpetrators to control women in those situations. There's examples of people not being able to access their mobile phone, or their laptop, or batteries being taken out of cars, where, it makes it harder for women to actually get away from a violent situation.

The government here in Victoria and in a whole range of other places, and the police have made it very clear. If you are at any risk in relation to family violence, domestic violence, you can leave the home. And that has been pleasingly, I think, a really strong message. At EDVOS we have provided, after hours, during the night support to women, who have actually been able to get out of their violent or threatening situations. There's just I think, been a real level of complexity that women have been dealing with.

IV Is there a sense amongst your organisation of almost trepidation as to what you might learn, as you begin to open up, and as women are able to access help a little bit more readily or support than they have been able to previously?

IE Our clients are expressing higher levels of isolation and psychological impact because they have been isolated from family and friends, which typically would serve as an informal kind of network of support, to be able to move out as the level of risk increases. And not being able to work, get that sort of support that you might get, like all of us, through a, being away from the home, if indeed, you are experiencing that degree of risk, has often served as a circuit breaker.

Whereas as we know, people have either had to work from home or in fact, not being able to work or people have lost their jobs. That has meant that women have different degrees of coping, as a result of family violence in the home but COVID in particular. The other thing, in terms of trepidation is just the financial difficulties that women are more likely to be in jobs that were impacted by COVID than males might be. So, that sense of hopelessness and being trapped, I think, has been quite highlighted for many people.

The other thing, I think, you're sort of picking up trepidation is, just children in the mix in families. And kids' experience of family violence is greater, obviously, because of a lockdown, being in their home environment. Their exposure is increased, but they're not able to also get out - go and ride a bike with some friends or whatever. And people in relationships where family violence does exist, are really trying to manage the family violence on top of parenting. Also, COVID and lockdowns, and that really does create a bit of a pressure cooker environment.

But Tom, one of the things I wanted to draw people's attention to is, a piece of work that Monash Uni did. And it's through the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre. This was actually some research that was done last year. They actually interviewed a focus group of workers within the family violence field.

And I might just draw on a couple of things that they said, that picks up that trepidation question that you're talking about. They really said that, the report does find from a survey of practitioners that, women experiencing family violence during COVID and the shutdown periods has had an exponential effect on risk, as I've mentioned. And more than half of the respondents reported that COVID had led to an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women. And there's some interesting numbers, which I won't sort of go into. And just under half of the practitioners surveyed reported that COVID had resulted in increase, and I think this is interesting, in first time, family violence.

The pressure cooker environment where there may be some preconditions for family violence, pre-COVID, has created just that sort of situation for people. There was an increase in first time, family violence reported by women, most notably three quarters of the respondents, so these are practitioners said that, the pandemic had increased the complexity of women's needs with 55% reporting a significant increase in risk as well, which is the point that I said earlier, in relation to what we're experiencing.

It reported that the pandemic has led to the emergence of new forms of violence against women. And that perpetrators are using COVID restrictions, and the threat of COVID infection, to include that notion of control, and a sense of movement for their partners, as a result of that. And there's all sorts of anecdotal stories about some perpetrators saying they had COVID, when in fact they didn't, which meant that the family might then need to isolate because they live with a perpetrator. A whole range of examples like that.

But it's interesting, I think what's been great in Victoria and many other places is, we've got off the mark pretty quickly in doing research about the impacts of something like these, which leads to that point about our learning, as we move forward, coming out of COVID. And I think that's the gem, in some ways, in a really fraught and sad and awful context and circumstance, for women and their children and their pets, is just that sense of what we've been able to learn and respond to, as a result of COVID

- IV Encourage people listening, we'll have a link to that report, for something to look at. It's also, not a bad insight into some of the dynamics of what control can look like. And how perpetrators use circumstances in such horrific ways, to exercise that control. It gives you an insight into some of that. I wanted to take you somewhere else. You mentioned a bit about the research work that has been going on. But there was also some in Rosie's quote that, you quoted earlier, both about the progress that's been made in recent years leading up to the pandemic and a sense of turning the corner.

Also, Rosie's comment about, it not being about services and systems. But being about people, women and their families, children, and efforts to put them at the centre. The family violence sector has been in a long period of reform, coming out of the Royal Commission. I'd love your observations just from your organisation about, how that reform journey is going and where you're heading and how much work there is still to do around really putting people, victims at the centre of the services, that you that you provide.

- IE Yes, it's a great question, Tom, because it is that sort of setting and infrastructure that sits around service provision, is interesting, but I am drawn, obviously, to Rosie's comment, that I mentioned earlier. It would be really remiss of me not to mention gender equity. There's family violence and some of the issues. The really tragic and challenging issues that we've talked about.

In order to look at how we make those changes, which is a segue into the reform side of things, in Victoria. We've got to look at gender equity, because it is that that continuum of family violence, which is around prevention, early intervention, education. Then you go into the response end, if someone's experiencing family violence, through to recovery, is typically how we would categorise that continuum in family violence.

But there's something that even seats before that, that is just community wide, mainstream wide, gender equity. And that women are at greater risk of exposure to COVID, while in lower paid jobs. Family violence increases during and in the aftermath of all disasters. And I spoke about some of those other layers in Victoria.

More women are unemployed, as a consequence of COVID. And women are shouldering a bigger burden of unpaid labour in the home. It's a segue into the reform environment, I think. The gender equity side of things is so important, I think, to understand. In Australia, as we know, there's a lot of things going on at the federal political level around gender equity representation and behaviour. It's important just for people to reflect on that, I think, as something that really contributes to family violence.

- IV I think your point is also well made, just how much the pandemic has been a step backwards, in a lot of the ways that we've been working to promote gender equity. You mentioned women being more likely to lose their jobs or to work in industries affected. There's also been some research on unequal burden of additional childcare or homework that's come from those things. There's a range of ways in which the pandemic feels like a step back, in relation to some of those and gender equality measures that we're hoping to move forward with.

- IE Absolutely, Tom. I think that's a really nice, nice in the context of really difficult work, encapsulation of that. And GEN VIC is a peak body in Victoria, that look at gender equity, health promotion. They just noted that before the pandemic, Australia was already going backwards, to pick up on your point on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index. We were 44th in the world, which was down from a high of 15, 20 years ago.



I mean, it's mind boggling. You just can't understand in contemporary Australia, how some of that, how we could get to that point. There is a high risk that gender inequity will be worsened by the virus, which is the points that I'm just highlighting. Some work to be done and I suppose that's a good way to frame up the sector reform because gender equity and family violence is everyone's issue and everyone's responsibility. It's not just those of us that work in the sector, getting back to exactly Rosie's point.

In relation to the reforms, I've said consistently, since I've come into my role in May last year is that, if you were experiencing family violence, or at the threat of family violence, or working in family violence, Victoria has, as a jurisdiction, been leading across Australia, in relation to the reform, the policy. The injection of funding has been second to none, across the state, notwithstanding Commonwealth contribution. The establishment of Family Safety Victoria, as a result of the Royal Commission that was held in 2016, has set out a really, I think, excellent framework for the work that needs to be done, to just reduce a really shocking blight on our society.

Some of the things that the Royal Commission looked at and in the reforms were legislative architecture and infrastructure. And reform their awareness and community attitudes through organisations, like Our Watch, and some of the others that I've mentioned. I think a really strong focus on victim survivors and holding perpetrators accountable, I think, has been a really important shift.

And even in our discussion, I think, there's that journey people go through in their minds about, perpetrator accountability is not maybe the way I would have described it, prior to that been drawn to my attention. And I think, that's been something that the reforms have done and are doing. Obviously, workforce is significant and funding the workforce and the foundation for the reforms, has been really important.

And just driving change, reforms in and of themselves are exactly that. They are reforming either an existing system or building a new system or transitioning a system and service infrastructure. And I think that's what has been strengthened. But to give an example, our organisation, seven years ago was 28 staff and \$3,000,000 turnover. And this year, we're 120 staff and about to be next financial year, \$20,000,000 turnover. If you look at just from a growth and scale perspective, it gives you a sense. But it also shows the investment that's been made to fund and really put some significant grunt and effort behind investing in that sort of reform.

The thing to sort of finish on the reforms, Tom, for me, that we really want to continue to focus on, embedding victim survivors at the centre of my organisation's work, and all of the work that we do across the sector but in a policy context. And there's some great examples of victim survivor advocacy or advisory council in Victoria. But even at the really local level, in organisations like ours, that victim survivor voice needs to be, I think, really prominent, and build on what we're doing.

Workforce, we're all competing, in some ways, in the human service community sector, for a similar type of a workforce. And when you've got scaling up and growth like we have, the workforce supply and workforce skills and training, I think are really important. Perpetrator accountability is something, as I've mentioned, as part of the reform environment, a focus on that. And children as a primary victims, are really important and emerging in terms of the sorts of responses provided.

And safe, accessible, affordable housing. And I know, even in some of your other podcasts, I listen to Gill Callister, from a mental health perspective. Housing, all roads often lead to safe, accessible, affordable housing, when you come into these really big, social problems that we're trying to address. And the final one, I would say is, just the broader system, but particularly working with the courts. And breaking down some of those very institutionalised, bureaucratic systems. And there's some terrific examples of work in courts. I do think there's some areas of focus there.



IV Can you tell us a bit about the experience of your workers, in your organisation and where they're at, 18 months into this period of pandemic plus an extraordinary period of growth and demand before that? Exhaustion must be an understatement. What's the experience like for your workforce and how are they experiencing things at the moment?

IE It's a really good question to hone in on their individual experience, Tom. The first thing I would say is, I don't ever really want to start a new job as a CEO, in a pandemic where there's still staff that I've not met, in person. We have a weekly check in with all staff, on Zoom. I know their faces in a Brady Bunch context, but I just have not met some of the staff.

My response to the question is with that context because it has been really challenging as many other CEOs have experienced. One thing I would say is, working in your, and we've had a hybrid model, like some organisations because we've been an essential service. We've had to manage social distancing, physical distancing in the office. How we manage clients coming in and out. We've really, in the last six months been working at about 15% of staff in the office, and on a rotational, sort of roster.

For those service facing, client facing staff, they've at least had a bit of contact with each other, and that sense of connection through going into the office, whereas others in some of our non-client facing areas literally have not been in since May last year or thereabouts. What I'd like to illustrate, is the nature of privacy, and the traumatic type of work that we're doing.

If you're if you're dealing with clients, in your own home, in your own lounge room, that is difficult to manage them. And we've got a whole sense of criteria and preconditions to manage privacy for clients. But switching off when you're dealing with family violence related matters. And you're working from home, predominantly phone calls or Zoom calls or whatever, that's really hard to do that work life balance, I think. Whereas it's something about physically leaving your workplace, catching the train home or driving home, there's that sort of transition.

We've certainly noticed that, that can be quite difficult. It has been, for some of our staff, quite isolating. Half of our staff are under 38, 35. Some of them are in share environments. Their home environment has been quite difficult. We've had to make some exceptions so that people can work outside of their own home environment because it's just not conducive to the work. It's also really hard for them and their fatigue and mental health.

And the other thing is, the pressure on leaders. This can be at the local level, team leader, managing a small team, right through to people that have sort of larger responsibility, just that cohesion and gelling. And a lot of your other guests have talked about that sort of leadership piece in keeping people as motivated and engaged as they can.

The approach that I've taken is, to actually allow people to feel pretty vulnerable and to feel fatigued because it is absolutely a by-product of what we've experienced. I've mentioned to you previously, that the approach I've taken with individually and collectively with staff has been around four areas, empathy, empower, enable and evolve. And what has that looked like? And what have we experienced as individuals in the organisation at EDVOS? As a group, will do some reflective thinking around those areas.

One of the things that I think is really important is, to learn from the learning that we've had over the last 12 months or so. It's all a work in progress but I think the key thing is, the working from home, and the impact that's had on people, when you're doing the work that we're doing, can't be underestimated. The layer upon layer of complexity that people are dealing with.



IV You began in your role, during this period. And so, without the existing face to face relationships that you might have drawn on in doing that. How have you found the ability to connect with people, to do things like empathy from often virtually, and from being a relative newcomer during this time?

IE It's been hard, if I'm really honest. It's been difficult. It's that stuff that you do, intuitively, in person that changes when you're in an online environment. Can we tick the boxes about things like, frequent weekly sort of check ins, trying to be clear and transparent in our communication around COVID? Have we got all the checks and balances around our COVID response team? Yes, all of those things are in place.

I'm someone that's energised by people and physically being around people. So personally, as CEO, I found that quite difficult to do. In my previous organisation, which actually was Expression Australia, which delivers services to the deaf community. I'd already been there eight years and went into COVID, and the transition to working from home. I knew the people, I knew the language, I knew the culture. I knew the pressure points for individuals and the organisation.

Whereas moving into the role at EDVOS, I didn't know those norms and cultural totems of the organisation. They just weren't there for me. So, that that's probably been a really interesting reflection for me. Tom, I do want to, you mentioned hope. I do want to just weave this in because I was lucky enough in 2018, to do the strategic perspectives in not-for-profit course, at Harvard. It's a scholarship through Harvard Club of Victoria, which was a wonderful opportunity.

One of the things that one of the professors in the business school said to me that, I just have at the back of my mind all the time is, he said, hope is not a strategy. And I just thought, wow, that is such an amazing thing. And apparently, you can attribute that to Rudy Giuliani said it when, but apparently, that's not the origins of it. He actually said it when, Barack Obama year was elected president. He said, because change is not a destination, just as hope is not a strategy. I think Obama have been talking about change as a destination.

I think about the course as a leader and CEO, over the last 18 months about hope is not a strategy. I've been asked to talk about this on a couple of occasions, about my view is, can hope be part of your strategy. And in fact, if you think about what we've endured and experienced over the last 18 months or so with COVID, I think it can.

Hope is critical to achieving a strategy, if it's based on what is possible, perhaps not highly probable, but possible. The recognition that, the degree of each is not necessarily equal and that truly has been going on in my mind. When hope is based on real world experience, knowledge, tangible and intangible data, it can result in trust, which is necessary to implement any strategy.

And finally, that hope recognises the reality that failure happens. And that success is not assured and prudence is needed to discern when you persevere and when you need to pivot.

IV Our guest today has been Chris Mathieson from EDVOS. Chris, thanks so much for being a part of this conversation.

IE Great, thanks, Tom. It's been terrific.

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