

## The Leadership Diet with Stephen Keys

**Pod:** Welcome Steve, to this episode of the leadership diet so great to have you here and. Thank you for joining us from Singapore.

**Stephen:** Thank you very much for inviting me along,

**Pod:** of course, is that keeping your locations to Sydney and Singapore, as opposed to all your usual ones? Steve is a president for Asia pack middle East and Africa.

So I would imagine right now, your travel is pretty limited, Steve.

**Stephen:** Yes. My carbon footprint is looking far healthier. I suspect

**Pod:** the fly part is, might be decreasing, but your carbon footprint is also following the same route.

**Stephen:** They keep emailing me saying it's okay. My frequent flyer status is being rolled over for goodness knows how many months or years, but it feels good not to be flying quite so much.

**Pod:** I bet there's so many topics I want to talk to you about particularly the ifs foundation, which is the one of the charity arms of ifs that you are. Responsible for it as leading from an executive perspective. But before we jump there, I want to take you right back to when you've left England, your voice has already given it away.

You're a, you're an Englishman. You left England for the first time and moved to, I think it was Australia. In fact, for our Primavera. And I'm interested in your first ex-pat role and looking back then some of the leadership learnings, and maybe even mistakes you made in your first time as an expert leader.

**Stephen:** I came to Australia in August, 2003, just in time to watching them win the world cup in case you've.

**Pod:** I don't think we did

**Stephen:** no. I've always had an idea of wanting to live and work overseas. I learned French and German when I was younger at school and stuff, and always wanted to leverage language. I just had a fascination with traveling when I was given the opportunity to relocate with work.

It was a. Strange experience sitting there. I don't remember ever feeling so small before, and it was very strong sensation of just being just it's me. And, my oldest boy then, but there was only, it was only one of him around the other one came with him while we're in Australia.

And, yeah, we just all felt very small in this big old world, settled into a job. So I left, I was running an international channel sales business for an American software company and then joined a private organization, private Australian organization to run their business, here in Australia

**Pod:** What were the first few months, like for you in that regard.

**Stephen:** Terrifying at first terrifying. Yeah, it's very interesting. w the expat experience we will, first of all, looked after. I have to say there was a third party organization that managed our transition, helped out with visas. We had somewhere safe to stay for the first few weeks. They took us out to look at different areas, to find somewhere, to live on a more permanent basis.

they even took us round supermarkets to point out how things are, say, but different, all those sorts of things get back accounts, set up, all that kind of stuff. So that was fantastic. Incredibly useful. So I think it was for me easier because I could throw myself into work and I could immediately make connections through work.

And there was a sense of the relationships, a formal working relationship, and you're going to be there for a couple of years. So you're going to invest social capital. One of the problems. I think my wife subsequently divorced one of the, one of the things my wife at the time found really difficult was building relations.

And I think because we were originally on a four, five, seven visa, we ended up becoming permanent residents and then became citizens. But then on a 457 visa, a lot of people, you know what okay. Say, hello? Okay. To get to know you a little bit socially, but they weren't really prepared to invest social capital because a lot of people are there for two years and they move on to another role.

So they weren't too sure about us. And I think that would have been very hard for her.

**Pod:** Those people who don't know a 457 visa is a visa in Australia used to sponsor corporate leaders coming from other countries. Into Australia to work at for a finite period of time. And the spouses is part of the visa.

When the work finishes, the visa finishes, therefore they have to leave the country. Hence the notion of transition and diva. as I've written a lot of books on next pet transitions and one of the key hardships, if you want to call it that are the difficulties with ex-pat roles is.

How does the spouse fit into a community, particularly when they know, as you said, they might be leaving the community two or three years later. And Australia is one of those areas that doesn't have overt ex-pat communities like Singapore, obviously it's a very strong expat community and it's very visible Australia doesn't so yeah, the families often find the transition more difficult.

You move from an international sales channel role into a sales leadership, or commercial leadership role. And therefore part of your skillset is going out, meeting people, setting up commercial relationships. So I would imagine for you setting up relationships of any kind was really the easier given your whole skillset.

**Stephen:** That part was straightforward. And I think my observation of the Australian business community is quite an open one. And I'd worked in Britain for a number of years. There is a dominant class structure. Still. You get a bit of that in Melbourne. They're the Collins street mafia and all that good stuff.

So there's a bit more of the old boys network from different schools, but in Sydney generally now, and largely broadly speaking across Australia, it's I found it. Quite refreshing. I'm prepared to work hard in the hours and I'm prepared to just pick up the phone. and I found that if I picked up the phone, I could get through to people.

They'd give me half an hour of their time and quite refreshingly, if they liked what I was saying, that introduced me to someone else and the conversation would move on and equally, if they didn't, they'd be quite upfront. No. Certainly that you very much. Bye. Okay. I respect that. That for me was a real positive about that transition to Australia, quite refreshing.

**Pod:** Great. I think when I first met you had left that original company. You joined a German enterprise company and your role was a senior vice president for Asia Pacific in Japan.

**Stephen:** Yes.

**Pod:** So you'd move into a bigger role. Commercially, I'll see multiple markets as your first time covering multiple markets where you were responsible for the P and L et cetera.

What was that transition like?

**Stephen:** you and I met, I joined software IJ in 2006. So during that 2006, I ran Australia for three years. I was invited to step up to run the services business for a further three years across Asia, Pacific Japan. And yeah, just as a, as you and I met and I have to give credit to my manager at the time who was aware of that transition, that impending transition for me to actually step up to them, the whole commercial operation across Asia, Pacific, Japan, middle East.

And he recognized that I would need support maybe in a way that he wasn't able to provide. Cause he was an incredibly busy role himself. So he gave me the opportunity to find an objective coach. It was a very interesting experience for me to go through that exercise of, identifying, coach that we could work with.

I have these strange fees of people coming in to the office every couple of days. And, I don't know, maybe there was half a dozen of them and one walked up and asked me. What color I felt like today. And did I want to hug and look? No, not particularly. another one kind of came in and said, so how do you think I can help you?

Because I think I could help you in the following ways and then proceeded to tell me exactly how to do my job. And there was a whole bunch of very strange and different experiences. And then you came in and just started asking candidates, direct challenging questions. They did so in a way that for me, at least created it sense of psychological safety.

I never, whilst I felt the questions were challenging, I never felt that they were, invasive or aggressive. They were well intentioned. I could really sense that from our early interactions. And that gave me the confidence to open up and talk about some of the things that were really going on.

You didn't promise any hard answers at that time. You said that Jodie, I think that's worth exploring. I'd like to suggest that we leave cover on these particular topics. I think there's more that we could explore there. And there's some interesting ideas that we could touch on.

And I think you shared with me a couple, the idea is in the form of some articles and that whole sense of evidence based mutual learning, going for a kind of data gathering exercise, and then go, when I journey together like a kind of a form of guided. Self-discovery for one, a better perspective. I needed that.

I was about to step up into a pretty senior role. I was going to step onto the group executive board at the time you take on that new role. And I felt. maybe I didn't realize it at the time, but certainly my manager at the time clearly felt that I was badly under, yeah, I really think you need this, but yeah, so that was incredibly useful.

That was an important part of my transition into proper leadership role.

**Pod:** Do you remember when you look back now on the, the, as you started realizing this is a bigger role is requiring me to step up, what did step up mean for you step into what is the different ways of being different ways of thinking different levels of doing what was it for you?

**Stephen:** Yeah, I certainly feel like prior to that moment, I had. We'll let you label it on the opinion that I was supposed to have all the answers. If I was the leader or the manager that somehow I'm the one that's responsible for providing all the answers. I had to be the smartest guy in the room I had to lead at all times by providing the answers, being the big, always rights being always there, always present.

There was one particular time when I first stepped into that leadership role at a newly Sherlock stepping up to the group executive board and just the sheer volume of work that came down when I was letting it all come on to me from above. And I was trying to deal with all the issues that were coming up from underneath me.

And it just was overwhelming. There's just the sheer volume and that sense of, everything was obvious. I was probably micromanaging. I was obviously, it was highly centralized decision making, just really just relying on my myself. I don't remember at least one clear experience. We were just at mine's point, walking down blues point load.

I have to get out of the office. I could feel my heart rate going. I could feel I was feeling really hot and very stressed in the office. And so I went for a walk in the hallway, just kicking off and I'm just trying to breathe normally and wondering what the heck was going on. And yeah, that sense of just crushing weight on my shoulders.

I had a realization. I just simply cannot continue in that way. I cannot continue to think that I can take all of that on myself and continue to be successful. That to me was a, was, it was a pretty uncomfortable moment, but an important one to them, totally transitioned to a different way of thinking.

**Pod:** Let's just clarify. You're a very fit healthy man. You're a very active athlete. So the crushing sense of physicality, you felt wasn't a cardiac type event. It was a stress related pressure on myself, the way I'm thinking of it.

**Stephen:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Yeah. I was always doing defense, the classic kayak event. I'm just doing ultra marathons and all sorts of things. And yeah, there's nothing wrong fitness wise, but yes, an emotional stress, a burden. And that right was, it was entirely stress related that the heaviness of that sense of responsibility and obligation, it would crush him and suddenly there's this sense of, I can't.

possibly continuing that way since then I've looked back on. I realized that moment was a very important one. there's a wonderful quote already when the things that Blake, that people get around to getting things done. But sometimes you have to really, for people to change or for there to be any form of change within an individual and organization level, you have to understand the consequences of doing nothing.

And to realize that consequences something is so very bad, that you are compelled to think radically about how you might address your situation. It creates a sense of crisis and the only real. Response to a crisis is radical thinking. I would say they're feeling that crushing weight.

And it was like, okay, the consequences of me continuing to function, the way that I am, that's, that is not going to be good for me. I'm likely have some kind of physical problem. I'm

certainly likely to have some severe mental health issues as a result of this, really beginning to feel that, and it presented as a form of crisis.

The only logical response to crisis is radical thinking. It forced me to pivot my thinking almost immediately.

**Pod:** Before we jump into how you developed and moved into a different way of thinking. If you're able to remember now, what were some of the impacts of your leadership at that point in time, IAU under stress, you under burden?

How is that showing up to your team or to the folks around you?

**Stephen:** wow. That's a bit proud of that. how has your presenting, I agree, definitely angry. Definitely arrogant. I think I was perceived as quite arrogant. I had a nickname. I only learned about a few years later called the killer in German, the German word for the killer.

yeah, two cores. And, that's it, once you had that, once you're in the, in the bath, but that's it, so that would get the wrong side of him. So can you imagine. Are you thinking about how that affects other people, then don't go to the wrong side of them, where they didn't the doctor to say things that challenge you, that even if you're plainly doing something wrong, no, one's going to tell you all day.

**Pod:** There's another word that you and I have discussed over time. Andy, we've laughed many times at this notion, but there's a word that was around you in that period. And I've never heard of, since it's called Shittah Graham, what is that?

**Stephen:** Yeah, I shoot to Graham is, is it, yeah, it'd be like, if you've ever watched old division one football from England in the seventies and you see some of the defenders the way they tackle and they go in very hard.

And there's a phrase you used, which is when you leave something in the tackle, you get the ball. But definitely. Yeah. Now the plan now that they've just been tackled, so yeah. Yeah. So it's hard and it's firmness. Yeah. And so it shits at Grammy's, it's an email that's heavily laid and dripping with sarcasm bites, or it delivers a message and they lesson, and it comes with a really big, giant slap.

It hurts. Yeah, it hurts and it's designed to hurt and boy, it feels good. You ride them and you get all of that anger and stress and frustration out and all those types of things. And it's it's blind culture at its worst. It's just, it's just terrible. It's just terrible. I used to be very good at it sometimes.

Yeah. I confess I still write them, but then I've learned to, I've learned to not just stick them in draft and then delete them. I don't have any good, the learning there is to shift your perspective from the blame culture piece, always wanting to blame others. If something's

gone wrong, though, the reality is that in some way, shape or form you as a leader, haven't done something right.

And so now I try to shift my perspective, being a blamer to curious problem solver. What is it that I didn't articulate properly? How is it that I found to support that individual and what they were trying to do? How else could I have addressed the situation? Yeah. Oh, there's a million questions I would want to ask about.

So first, before then seeking to ask questions.

**Pod:** Great.

You're walking down this point road in which is proud of Sydney. You felt this crushing weight of, I gotta do something different. You moved from the way where you shift your thinking, as you said, you shifted your thinking quite radically . And what was the impact?

**Stephen:** Yeah, there's a realization that I did want to be that thing anymore, that I couldn't inhabit that space anymore, but this sense of trying to take oughta myself, it just wasn't going to work.

I wasn't going to be able to be successful and being successful, mattered a great deal to me at that time. Of course he still does. You want it? You want it, you want to deliver results, but maybe in a different way. That's why that lighter. Was it, you that talked about the YouTube thing. When they, before they make an album, they go and listen to a whole bunch of music and then decide what they don't want it to sound like.

They're not going to sound like this. Then they turn and say, if it's not that, then you turn and you say what you're gonna do. And it was the same thing in that moment. It's I don't want to inhabit this space. What space do I do? I want to have it with wine? Where do I turn to it? I think in very simple terms, it was a sense of, okay.

Accepting the vulnerability of saying, I don't know, accepting vulnerability as a form of it and say, I don't know, I don't have all the answers. I don't know how I'm going to get there. And actually I am prepared to let people know that's how I'm feeling. I'd ask for the help. That was. That was very difficult to acknowledge that at the time, when I'd had such a fixed view about leadership, I allow them what I was supposed to be doing, but it was a profound moment in terms of creating the opportunity for the team to emerge for a leadership team, to emerge, to bring people around me that.

that could help the, can contribute that word, vulnerability, that sense of by saying, I don't know. It's also acknowledging my willingness to learn the reaction from people around me was really interesting at first it was like, okay, who are you? What have you done with Steven? No.



Yeah, right? Yeah. It's also, where's, where's the punch kind of ducking a wave and waiting for it. and actually, I would have to say this no fault of the organization that I was working for, ultimately for me to fully present. As a leader in the way that I realized I now had to ultimately led to me leaving that organization for a whole bunch of reasons.

Finally, she started to start establishing a new set of values that were more grounded to who I felt I really was and who I really am. And then it was very difficult for some people to be able to adapt to that around me. They were so used to that. I've been with that organization for eight and a half years.

And then for the last year and a half of that suddenly presenting in a very different way was difficult. It was difficult for me also to inhabit that space. Cause a lot of people just expected the same things of me. And so a lot of friction points,

**Pod:** that's actually a very interesting point. You raise there.

Steve, I've seen this happen many times when a leader is overtly trying to change the way they think change their attitude, change their belief patterns and therefore change their behaviors. This system around them is so used to a particular way because the system has that. Or indeed they're used to the leader being like that.

The system often prevented happening. The leader eventually has to recognize that if I truly want to shift this, I may have to change roles. Sometimes that's within the same organization. Sometimes there's in your case, it's leaving the organization. But I need to start a fresh, the beauty about changing your role is even if you're in the same organization, you might move geography.

You have the ability to rewrite yourself. You have the ability to reorder yourself from day one, as opposed to trying to change the script. And in hindsight,

**Stephen:** yeah. we did some cool things. if you remember when we were working together during that time and we'd introduce them tools and processes to help build trust within that leadership team.

I said that was one thing. Trust was at an all time low, no one trusted anyone. That was a reflection of my behavior. And so we started with that idea. Didn't worry about that. No, not trusting each other, completely just trusting each other enough to have a different type of conversation, enough trust.

Very powerful idea. I've used that a few times just to have the necessary heartfelt conversation that would enable us to talk about difficult, sensitive topics. Remember that one, should we did it at Q station? I do a couple of people try and those questions. Yeah. And, and I found that very hard. I'd walk away.

I'd go to the back of the room, but space around. Did I really want to just keep that down? Okay. Demonstrating vulnerability and I have to reciprocate and let you know, that was

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really quite some powerful moments. And so we did, I think. I large, we took that as far as we could within the constraints of that organization, but yes, to your point, sometimes systemically an organization is set up to want certain things and certain outcomes.

And yeah, it got to the point where I felt like, through that process of self discovery, that a bet on food for working together with you, I'd say it's a self process of self discovery, reconnected to a sense of who I really am for a series of quiet. Profound questions and challenging questions that you'd right.

I think one that you asked me was what parts of me haven't met before. Remember that was something that really connected with me. That was, why I play music in my spare time, I play the guitar badly. I write songs occasionally, but that creative part is like very that's my personal life.

And I never bought any of that. It's my professional life. And You talked about that. How about I could bring more of that discipline that I was applying to my professional work into my creative life and make it much harder from a commitment to that in terms of practicing and rehearsing and getting better at it.

And then also bringing some of that creativity into my professional life. What would that mean? what would happen. what happened was I became a lot more grounded and centered as an individual. I no longer had two identities. I was just me and that in itself was a great unburdening, of that.

And I was able to just be me and there was none of those. so far fewer of those stresses and strains, you asked the question before, about how did it manifest itself? Before then I remember not only was I angry at work, I was also very angry at home and I remember very difficult transitioning for work environment, back to a home environment, some patterns and behaviors, and look back on now a off, but, once I realized and reconnected in that way, suddenly.

very sensitive around who I am. I've got a clear value system and it became so much more easy to operate in all aspects of my life. Cause it's just me. That's really important. The ability to ask beautiful questions that shape our identity as much, was that quite as much in the asking is as in the answering right now, that is a really important part of the coaching process.

I think.

**Pod:** yeah, I think you and I both enjoy poetry in general, but particularly David White, who is from Yorkshire and from Ireland. And, I think I would have stolen that quote from him when I asked you about what part of you, you haven't met yet. I suspect that's one of his lines.

**Stephen:** I'd be curious,

**Pod:** And simple question that he raises and that you explored, which is if there's parts of you that you love, how come it doesn't matter, how come you don't integrate that. And it sounds like the way that you talked about it, there was a degree of anger you were holding. Cause you weren't quite getting to where he wants to get.

Despite the level of energy you are putting into it and you were. Racing faster and faster, and yet was getting more and more out of sight for you. And once you learn to stop and pause and actually go, hold on, I can do this differently and I can enjoy my music and I can join my creativity and I can bring in a community service into my life as well.

It doesn't, I'm not separating them. I'm actually integrating them.

**Stephen:** If I think about the time, you know what, when I was first in that role, I was going through that stress for sure. I was trying to emulate an idea about what I thought leadership should be. and I was looking at kind of people around me.

I figured I should be like that and be like that. I think I was much more easily influenceable. And I think that probably manifested itself as well in the workplace when people look at it and go one day and be like this next day like that. And yeah, not really granted. I think people pick up on that one side, set it reconnected, got very sensitive about who I am, why value system.

It really enabled me to present. Much more effectively as a human being first and foremost. but yeah, it was a leader. No, I don't always get that. But I've tried to keep that idea very close to me as often move forward in subsequent roles. and it's proved to be just a gift that keeps on giving, it's a wonderful female fighter.

I'm much more connected with the people around me and there's a much. Brought a degree of trust there because people know that I'm consistent in my behaviors and my attitude and my outlook, and they understand who I am, the good and the bad. And I really appreciate that. That crazy. It's a sense of psychological safety that's so that's a key idea, a sense of psychological safety where people know they feel trust enough trust policies between us that enables them to share ideas.

To be wrong, to make failures, to be able to contribute, to learn, to show their own vulnerability. And so therefore work together as a true leadership team to get stuff done. That's not only more rewarding. It's a lot more fun as well.

**Pod:** And liberating. It allows people to play to it, to experiment into play and into, to not that not live waiting for, eat or nothing or a slap or whatever the reaction might be.

**Stephen:** Yeah, of course

**Pod:** Can I move us to a different conversation. you ended up leaving that organization and you became the CEO of a privately owned organization in Australia, where you eventually had to basically do a merger of from memory four or five different organizations into one, where you were taking a range of your effect with the group CEO that sat across a range of different businesses.

And in some senses, you play the role of a chair of a board. But actually as in the group, CEO setting are reporting to the, the ownership structure. What's the difference as a group CEO, when you have all the CEOs reporting to you relative to when you are the precedent chart, it's like, how do you have to lead differently in that regard, compared to other roles you've been

**Stephen:**

It was a fascinating transition on a number of levels. First of all, it was the first time I bet no C E O all. So in the previous role, it was okay. And there was a regional leadership, but ultimately reporting into group executive board. So some aspects of vision and strategy were established collectively.

Oh, I know I was asked to buy into that. So in this instance, type of doing in that prior to me coming on board, the company was very much a, I would say, almost a passive investor and these organizations. So yeah, it was, the company was a federated group of it, services businesses. The company had either a minority or majority stake in all of these different businesses.

And so it was very much so passive supporter investor sometimes, a bank guarantor type relationship, but not really having a meaningful input. And the reason to join that takes that load off was the sense of how we might actually be stronger together. We might be better off working and collaborating more closely together and leveraging our mutual strengths.

and the opportunities available to cross that an upsale and, to consolidate some of the back office functions and all that kind of good stuff. So there was some huge efficiency dividends we were hoping to realize, but as you could imagine, each of these organizations, the CEOs of their respective organizations were still part of the business, the founders, the owners.

That's sold either minority or majority share for different reasons. And, they each had their own strong, clear sense of purpose and identity. So it was a challenge trying to create a new shared identity. That was a broad enough church for everyone to feel like they could be a part of whilst also respecting their, it was like trying to form the European union.

**Pod:** How'd you go with that one?

**Stephen:** it's the color quality. We have a few Brexiteers that's for sure.

**Pod:** Ultimately, over a three year period, it was a very successful process for you and the organization, but it wasn't all, it didn't feel like at the whole way through I'm imagining who,



where were some of the moments where you had to lean into leadership and really try and pull it through?

**Stephen:** it's successful in some ways and not in others. successful in that we established a group identity successful in that we established core common systems, that they drive massive efficiency, dividends, and visibility and transparency for the organization. We got really clear about, our purpose industry specialization.

It drove really good top and bottom line growth. as a shareholder community, there was that was a great set of outcomes. I think it was just part of the journey. So I can look back on that three year period and say, okay, we achieved, we treat quite a bit, there was so much more than I think could have been done.

If I look back on that, I think. There was a lot of good intent there to want to take that data to the next level and to potentially even list the thing and go on. There was a phrase and I don't mean it in a negative way that you perceive yourself based on your intentions and others perceive you on your behaviors.

And whilst I think there was a lot of good intent within the organization. The behaviors were still of a federated group of companies and it did seem to ultimately suit everyone quite well. So I felt like I've taken it as far as I could within the boundaries that. That shareholder community decided to accept themselves.

Yeah, that was an interesting learning thing for me as well, actually, was this idea of what group CEO, that doesn't empower you to make all the decisions, that's not, there was a chairman, there was a board, there are founders and shareholders, and there are different stakeholders that manifest themselves in lots of different ways.

And ultimately one has to acknowledge and take all those things in consideration. I had a very clear vision of what I hoped to achieve, and then I had to make some compromise. It's just along the way to align everyone around a common set of goals and outcomes. Everyone was fed sign up to within that context, we did some pretty cool things.

Yeah, for sure. You always wish you could do more, but we had a good, but a good journey. It was a diplomatic role. It was a certainly a great learning opportunity for me to sit on lots of different boards to learn about what makes a good board function really well. And where are there when I were there some major issues. I think a lot of organizations can slip up on.

**Pod:** Let's jump to that in a second, but there's a point you raised a few minutes ago. That thing is really important. just underlining. And that is the perceived influence of the CEO role. Yes. I would suggest that a lot of folks who actually have never been in the CEO role assumed the CEO role has the ultimate power to get lots of stuff done and clearly the role.

Does enable all the stuff to get done, but there's also one of the fallacies at the CRO, just because the CEO wants something to happen, doesn't necessarily mean a will. And you've



given a great example there of, you're in an organization that's set up, has got a structure, has got a context. It's got shareholders, got multiple shareholders.

We're still in the business and you are able to bring it so far. And the context you're sitting in rightly or wrongly prevented. It going further along the path that you had deemed to be the right path and recognizing the CEO's limitations, I've influenced things really important when you were in that role.

**Stephen:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I think it's very, you are accountable to the board, a proper functioning board does set a strategy. There's really interesting power play. Isn't it? That a board is set up to represent the interest of the shareholders primarily. And as a CEO, you are both fair to respond to the guidance that you were given from the board to properly understand the shareholders in a directional guidance on what they're expecting of you as a CEO, that's the framework within which you operate.

But also I think a good CEO challenges. That board to acknowledge and respect the fact that there are many more stakeholders within an organization board. most traditionally, very, almost exclusively about the needs of the shareholder community. As a CEO, you have an obligation, I would say to make sure that the needs of the employee community, the workforce consideration stakeholders, like the communities in which we operate.

Gosh, our customers, partners a whole range of other stakeholders that whose needs I felt needs to be met. That's an interesting dialogue. Ultimately, a director has given a framework, a set, and the CEO operates within those very clear guidelines. Yeah. So yeah, it's not, it's not, you don't have the magic stick the whole time and you can wield, limit this power that's for sure.

Just as well.

**Pod:** exactly right. Just as well. And indeed the modern covert experience, we're all going through has taught us that none of us have ultimate power. the world can come along and shake you by your Rose and you least expect it. You mentioned, high-performing boards or boards that are, that can be functioning versus bores that haven't differentiated for us and the bores that were more effective or what boards can do to be more effective than the ones that are less helpful.

**Stephen:** I think a lot of the role I'm now more in, I used to not sitting on so many boards or whether when I was on the group executive board of German by software company, I only devalued the importance of a lot of the channels. I didn't necessarily understand how important that really was. Having said this.

We were a federated group of companies. I sat on six or seven different boards. The difference in an in board performance often depended on the chairman,

**Pod:** the strengths, meaning?

**Stephen:** what. I think the ability to spread to the board as a whole, in terms of being able to make clear decisions in a timely and effective fashion, to being able to acknowledge and openly talk about particular topics and issues to understand, and to qualify risk, to be able to talk about fundamental issues that relate to the kind of health and wellbeing of the organization.

In some boards, it was very operational, really stuck in the weeds. It's more effective board. There was an elevated conversation. A lot of it related to me, actually, the more successful boards, I found that yeah, the board meetings themselves, for many of the theater of the engagement, That actually, you were just, you would just, through the process, all the hard work happened outside and around that, but it's a form of leadership. I think back to what, one of the chairman in particular, he was incredibly good. Getting information out there, getting topics out there, having individual conversations with, with people, these short, intense one on one conversations, bit of feedback that a guidance, and then bringing that back, To the board at the appropriate time, if there was a particular topic, making sure that subcommittees were set up, making sure that they had a clear frame of reference within which they were supposed to operate.

And then when people did try to do things during the actual formal board process, being very clear about the governance and about the processes and not letting the conversation get distracted. So being, what's your phrase from friendly and fair to chairman chair, people do that. Do that very well.

That was. Huge learning process for me. And I remember taking a lot of notes during that time as much about board meetings themselves. The other thing that good chairman did a citrus note takers. Yes. Citrus, no matter what the formal notes said. I remember going to this guy's house one evening. We had, we were having dinner together.

I just saw all of his notebooks, all lined up. It was the chairman of the board of several companies all have separate shelves, personal notes dated. And I asked him about it and he said, let's just use an example. He pulled it out. He showed me the notes and it was a, both the formality of what was happening and also informal remarks.

And it clearly divided on each page for more walks and informal marks of the way that people were acting and behaving as much as what was being decided and discussed. Wow. And for him, that was his way of. Coaching and mentoring and an ideation, and also getting a check on the kind of health and wellbeing and how well is this board actually functioning.

And then the things that he needs to think about in terms of him improving the interaction of the board, what are we missing? Are we not getting enough challenging questions? We're not, it was a comprehensive process of observation and internal dialogue to help him be more effective as a chairperson.

I think it was fantastic.

**Pod:** That's a, an extraordinary insight to someone who's able to manage the strategic conversation, manage the process and governance that a board is to have. And he had take a helicopter view on all, are the dynamics happening as they're happening and just be able to record it from memory.

he's looking through his own lens, of course. So by nature of this, there's a bias there, but he's recording the events so he can stimulate his memory. Extraordinary.

**Stephen:** And it was very helpful, but I guess, he did say that he had one, one problem where someone had gone through a legal process and he was chair of a particular board and he felt himself being a little bit undercooked in terms of it is personal memory.

And he decided never to let that happen again. And subsequent to that was a big learning for me. I'm now an, a citrus note taker, I think not only when I'm sitting in board positions, but also just in any kind of meeting. I think it's really important if one is going to provide, we talked about that intentional one on one conversation, you have to have meaningful examples to share with an individual.

And I find that to be such so much more of a powerful. Are we assess now from having short one on ones, I can refer back to specific things or at the end of each quarter, I might send out a short note that individual say, just wanted to thank you for what you've done. And instead of it being, it's like a, Hey, we're doing great arm weights.

Okay. I really appreciate it. What you do this, for these reasons, you might be a lot more effective if you were able to do it such and such. And again, back that up with examples of where I think that they might be able to improve. I've had a lot of good feedback from people going there just.

Grateful that you've paid attention. I felt like I am aware I'm not, I am actually witnessing them, and their participation and that makes people feel, I don't know. It makes people feel good and makes people feel connected.

**Pod:** That's an extraordinary contrast. And I don't want to bring you back to history again, that's an extraordinary contrast to what you describe Ariane in terms of sugar grams, in terms of the way you used to write growers, but the intention behind it, different, the intention behind this is to give clarity, to give feedback, to express gratitude, and to point the future direction in terms of here's something else that we could do together.

The intention is to help.

**Stephen:** If I reflect on the paper that I've served, the, who I think was good leaders, they will do whatever it takes to help the team to be successful. both collectively and individually. Those ladies don't really care about whether they get the credit or not.

Those leaders are willing to sacrifice. And I do these little acts of service, and I think of that kind of note taking as an act of service for members of my leadership team, to help them be



the very best versions of themselves that they can write in my own way to coach and enable their personal development and success, and to be able to celebrate that.

I think that's very important part of the leadership function. Very different to 10 years ago.

It was all about all, about me. It was all about me there and whatever it took for me to be successful. And I'm just so over that as an idea, I still care about the results, but I think I've got to the point. Through that process, where if I can generally look at myself as I've done everything I can, for what my socks off, the way I do, I've got strong work ethic.

And if I really put that in to help at night in my team and support my team and help them to do as best as they can. And if we really feel like we've put in a hundred percent of the effort, then I guess I can accept the results for what they are and not let that define me in the same way that I used to.

It used to define me. I didn't use to sleep at night. And I used to think of myself as a failure. If we didn't get quite the results I wanted to get, I don't think that's particularly healthy. And I feel better for it now that I can compartmentalize that a little bit. It still matters results still matter.

Of course they do, but it doesn't define me in the same way.

**Pod:** That has moved to, I think, what may be not defining you, but certainly adding to your definition of who you've become. You're now the president of APAC, at least in Africa for ifs, being a global organization. This sit on the sweetest stock market, in a software industry, Gartner referred to ifs as an inmate.

2020 magic quadrant for field service management, a multiple award winning organization. Now you've been in software all year, but you didn't necessarily join ifs because of software. You're trying to further that and more. did you want to talk us through why you joined Darren Rose? Was the CEO rang you, who he calls you guys worked together before he rang you with an opportunity that was more than just leadership.

**Stephen:** Yeah. Wow. It was a really interesting conversation. So sat down and I did work together quite a lot itself, and we kept in touch after, after we've colored for him. He left to join another organization and I left gosh, probably 15 months after that we kept in touch. Whenever I was in England would always catch up.

And, he reached out to me. It was, April, 2000. Gosh, I can't remember. It was April, 2018, I guess it was when he called me and we might have been Singapore and I was quite curious because Darren and I were 40, quite similar back in the days that the company, we will both work at both quiet, quite aggressive and ambitious.

What kind of good stuff. I was very curious to see how he had evolved as a leader as well. He was taking his first was his first CEO. I know it's something that he cried. I was very curious to



see how the journey that had been on and learn and see how yeah. How he developed some of these ideas. I was really blown away.

First of all with his sense of humility in taking them the mall, clearly I've walked by that experience, which is genuinely excited. And I asked him about what he saw as his learning opportunity from this role. And he was able to talk about it, vulnerability, there, it was quiet. It was quite comfortable with that.

I don't know these things I'm really keen to learn wow. Okay. that, again, It's about psychological safety made me feel comfortable to open up. He knew full well. I was going to CEO long. I was enjoying it. And he was inviting me to for want of a better term, step back into a regional leadership role to look after AIPAC and middle East Africa, something I'd done before.

So there wasn't necessarily same kind of level of learning. They're of course, a different organization, different challenges. I knew it was a transformational growth story. A lot of the roles that I've been born into have typically been, I don't typically get high cause everything's going really well.

**Pod:** You're not a da. You got

**Stephen:** no. I get brought in to drive transformational growth to create that sense of, that radical thinking in response to a crisis and drive transformational growth off the back of that. So of course we talked about that and some of those.

Challenges and opportunities, but he, again, you talk, we talked earlier about this kind of sense of being witnessed to being noticed. And he said something quite that connected resonated with me. He says, I've noticed a lot about on the last five years where things have been going on, you've taken up more of an active involvement in social activities.

I got involved in a bunch of community service projects, With, whether it was doing soccer refereeing, whether it was, I think you're aware of this. so there is not a soup kitchen in Sydney or working with street work, a great organization that helps, helps kids in Sydney that had trouble with the law, doing a whole bunch of stuff like that, kids giving back.

And he said, I know that I don't really mean to not to you. And I've been thinking about what kind of organization I want to need. And I want to lead an organization that puts service at the heart of what it does. I want to be part of an organization with a lead, an organization that wants to help our customers provide better service to their customers.

And I want to make sure that our technology is an enabler for that. And I want to think about how we can provide better service customers and everything that we do. And I want to be a better service to our staff, and I want to be a better services to the communities in which we operate. We have to do that.



If we're going to be successful, if we're going to, if we're going to do all the things that I want to do, we have to service matters. It has to be at the very heart of everything that we do. And then he said, when it comes to community service, he would love for me to lead that he could see how much it means to me.

And he felt like that would be a really good learning opportunity. Give me a platform to test out some ideas and to try something different. It's a lead something new. and of course, the signups is went off and it was like, that would be fantastic. So he had me at that moment, quite frankly, and sorry.

It's a very good salesman as well.

**Pod:** Yeah, no, Steve, the charity guy.

**Stephen:** What really mattered to me. But again, I felt noticed, I felt like it acknowledged who I am and that meant something to me.

**Pod:** So what does the ifs foundation do or hope to do?

**Stephen:** Oh, wow. So gosh, we are a Swedish organization. We started out life in Sweden. We're now a global company with a presence in over 60 countries around the world, about 4,000 employees.

But. A good third of them, 1300 or so are based in Sri Lanka. 22 years ago, the organization set up its research and development global support center for Lanka, very brave choice back then the civil war going on at the time. What a far reaching idea could have charged in India, where we would have been a very small fish in a very big pond with lots of other organizations looking for good talent by coming into shrank.

And we were really able to set up something very. Different, a much safer environment. We've been going at it as a cipher for 22 years, 1300 employees, RFS already had in place. It's a scholarship program to help kids through the university. A lot of kids have the right skills, but don't necessarily have the money to fund that.

Why for university? So I've asked, had this program in place. Where you would, instead of doing a degree over three years, you'd do it on a five years. You would work part time, but if you do your university degree part time with pay all the funds. And at the end of it you'd have a degree work experience.

And 80% of those kids went on to work with ifs. So fantastic. It was a little bit of a way of giving something back to that community as well. And the startup for the ifs foundation was okay. That's all well, and good. We've got about 120. students I've gone through that scholarship site program so far, which is awesome.

But my starting point was okay to even get to the point where you can take it. The advantage of that scholarship means a whole bunch of things have gone your way

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throughout your life. Go back. let's work backwards from that moment and figure out all the things that make a difference, the crazy opportunity for child you get to that point.

And when you went back, would you really get down to some fundamentals? Sanitation, having proper sanitary facilities, it prevents disease. It enables girls to continue to attend school. Even when they reach puberty access to fresh water. It means that parents and kids don't have to spend hours walking to a source of fresh water and bringing that back, education, infrastructure, health, infrastructure, employment opportunities, start looking at those fundamentals.

Okay. Alright. So how can we do that? So we went out and did a couple of field trips to Sri Lanka. We went out to some remote parts of the islands of beautiful country, peaceful, resilient, beautiful people. This have endemic poverty issues, serious problems. When you step out in your majors, it's easy.

So we decided to set up the RFS foundation too, to help break the poverty cycle. Little parts of Srilanka why, as I say, it feels good to give something back to that particular community that serves us so well. Globally as an organization, we rely on what we do in Srilanka every day to support our customers.

So enables us to say, thank you. It's a cause that can unite our global community. We feel like we can make a profound difference, a really meaningful difference in what we hope will be relatively short period of time. And an idea that we feel that could last something also that could unite our, take our customers and our partners.

And I bought a community as well. So yeah, we've been running it for about, we set it up in may last year. We've raised. Oh, the other important point. We didn't want it to be an ifs funded thing. we, although ifs has given money to it, I just didn't want it to be, Oh, aren't we great. Cut a check. is that delinquent?

Isn't it send your checks? The tax deductible charity organizations we said was all funds had to be raised by staff. So everything we did had to be activities that our staff would undertake to raise the funds, sausage sizzles, carwash days, golf events, quiz nights, gala dinners. We're doing a virtual concert at the moment.

We've got that set up for next week where we've got ifs. Employees are going to come online and they're going to perform a piano or sing a song with a guitar or

**Pod:** all over the world.

**Stephen:** All over the world, all over the world. So it's employees anywhere around the world, in that particular event, but all sorts of events that we've done, we faced over a quarter of a million dollars so far, and that sense of doing it cause it's cause it matters and getting people to really buy into it and really.

Taking ownership for that, it just creates a sense of meaningful connection. Let's just put it that way. It goes beyond there being something that the organization says it must do it. Everyone goes, Oh yeah, pay lip service. So that's great. It becomes something that we collectively I'd say the example. I know this is gonna sound like a very strange one.

I read an article in the economist, just as we're thinking about the ISS foundation. And it was about the Swiss government was trying to figure out where it wanted to put a nuclear dump site in the country. And they were doing this research about where would be the safest place. They found two places where the safest possible place to dig a big hole, stick this stuff cover over stable, ground, stable rock, all that kind of stuff.

Anyway, these two, two social psychologists, opposed the government said before you make a decision, can we run a little experiment? And the experiment was this. They went to one village and said, right guys, we've done this research. Here's the findings, here's all the material. it's near your very fact fate as a way and this other village, and we need to make a decision.

If you're willing for it to be here, we'll pay you \$10,000 per household for it to be there. we think this is the buy side we acknowledged it's not great. We'll pay you \$10,000. Okay. With the other village, they gave all the same information. But they said, we want to do this. We think we should be putting it here because fundamentally we think it's the right thing to do.

It's your decision, but we genuinely believe this is it. We'd like you to make a decision, please. We welcome your input village, where the money was offered. The idea overwhelmed with it. The village that was offered, no money accepted it overwhelmingly. In other words, the idea of introducing money, the idea of introducing some kind of financial recompense, undermine the civic and moral worth of what they were trying to do.

And so they rejected the idea that I felt dirty. Like they weren't being told something that the village that said it is just part of your civic duty when. Okay. I completely buy into that and we will support that because it's the fundamentally the right thing to do. That's why we don't want ifs to be given the money.

That's what we want our staff to give them money because otherwise it would undermine the civic and moral worth of what we're trying to do. And I know that's so a high level concept is really important to me.

**Pod:** no, I love so much about what you say in here. And the word comes to mind more and more as you're talking is integration.

at a personal level, as a leader for you. And we would discuss this over the last half hour already. You've learned the last couple of years to bring different parts of you together. And then, it just becomes a bigger version of you. So we know you're a musician. So now you've got Steve keys version of live aid happening next week in terms of



But also you're a big believer in buy in helping people to put, to buy into something and then unleash their energy. And what you as organization have done here through your leadership of the foundation is, many organizations, thankfully cut checks and give it, but that's pretty much it you've gone through.

Do you know what? We can actually probably do a whole lot more by getting everyone involved and here's how you do. And, the notion of psychology of money can be a motivator, but can also be a detractor when people feel it's the right thing to do. So stop rewarding me for what should be the right thing to do.

Anyway. That's a far more integrated way of doing it. I love what you're doing here. and more importantly, I love the fact that you were so excited by it. There's a palpable on the screen here, down in Sydney. I can hear the energy coming through the airwaves.

**Stephen:** It's awesome. It's, yeah. People responding when they've raised money and they write me an email, they let me know and they say they want it to go towards a particular project or they've raised it to try and achieve something in that, to where it gets built.

And you get the photographs for on site and the feedback that comes from that sense of ownership of that. We're doing this as a collective it again, it goes to the heart of the idea of being of service to others. Particularly important at the moment, with the pandemic and our funds got everyone's got issues going on.

So it does afford us all a little bit of perspective as well. We try to do that. We also have at the same time, a volunteer day because some people said, okay, that's fine. That's great. But what about my community? Fair. So we've given everyone an extra day of leave as well, so that they could pursue social work in the open a project of their choice in their community.

And that's proven to be highly effective. Again, this idea of service matters being of service to your community. The community enables us to survive and thrive and continue to operate. It's wonderful to be able to be part of that and to facilitate and enable that as part of that kind of cultural fabric.

**Pod:** We're coming to the end of this interview. And it feels to me that we, as soon as we hang up, we need to book in for more sessions. Cause there's so much that it's so much for us to talk about and share across the interwebs, but got two questions for you to bring this session to a close today.

You mentioned lockdown live aid, and I'm looking forward to the, the DVD when that's released, wherever that is coming from

**Stephen:** Spotify. Look at Spotify.

**Pod:** I know you're right. If you're nothing, you're a music man. Or band,

**Stephen:** I think you now have a big bucket of fat and I think, as well as that, so I'm going to perform as part of our lockdown live.

I figured that I couldn't really ask others to do something I'm not prepared to do myself. I'm going to sing to make you feel my love, by Bob Dylan. And, I think it's, It resonates with me as a solver, particularly now at this moment in time, everyone is feeling a lot of stress and pressure with the COVID-19 situation and it's, and it does manifest itself in many different ways in the workplace, in particular, in our first start, you're not able to.

They use connected with people. There's those water cooler conversations are possible. We as leaders and as coworkers need to be a lot more mindful that perhaps everyone's got their own story and their own stresses that going on in their background and their lives. And that might be affecting the way that they manifest themselves and behave at work.

We need to perhaps be, have a little bit more empathy. A little bit more kindness and consideration for others in the workplace at the moment. And so familiar to make you feel my love. And I went when the rain is blowing in your face and the whole world is on your case, I could offer you a warm embrace.

It seems to be particularly pertinent in these times. And the

**Pod:** last question, which is the one I ask everybody in this particular podcast, and that is now given all the experience you've gleaned and some of the wisdom you've cultivated over the last 20 years. What would you tell the 35 year old version of you today?

**Stephen:** I saw that the questions and I was struggling, I thought, first of all, I'd probably give a big slap,

give him a big hug. And then I'd hand them a book of poems, we've you and I we've read some poetry together, whether it's the work with David White or whether it's wheelchair or what was the guy, if he everything's going to be a white Derrick man, in fact, I'd probably give him that poem.

Everything is going to be all right, but there is it Derek man.

**Pod:** I'll include a link to that in the show notes.

**Stephen:** You absolutely should. it is a beautiful poem. And, I'd probably read that to my younger self and, and hopefully that would land

**Pod:** Steve. It's been a pleasure. It's been a pleasure over a long period of time has been a pleasure today.

Thank you so much for sharing all of your insights and all of your learnings and in the transparent, honest to way that you always do, which I appreciate

**Stephen:** it. You're welcome. Thank you for the opportunity. You take care. Thank



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