



Adam Lacey: Welcome to this Leading Future Humans audio series from Assemble You and Liggy Webb. My name is Adam, co-founder of Assemble You, the audio learning experts, and in this series, I'm joined by the author of *Resilience: How To Cope When Everything Around You Keeps Changing*, international speaker and behavioural skills specialist Liggy Webb.

The original Future Human series focused on a set of human behavioural skills identified by various research, including the World Economic Forum, as skills for the future that will be essential to us in the coming years. In the first series we explored each of these in depth and examined why they are important and how we can individually improve at them.

In this second series, we're looking at how, as leaders, we can support developing that same set of skills in the people that we lead. We're excited to dive into each of these topics. As before, this Leading Future Human series is all delivered via audio and designed to be consumed on the go. So Liggy, what are we talking about today?

Liggy Webb: Well, today, Adam, we're going to be talking about leading innovation.

Adam Lacey: Let's get into our first question. Why is this topic so important? And in particular, why should leaders care about this so much right now?

Liggy Webb: Well, we're living in an ideas economy where turning ideas into innovation faster than the competition is absolutely critical to business success so having an innovative workforce is so important.

Adam Lacey: Yes, I couldn't agree more. I think it's useful for problem-solving, for growth, for managing change, all these different things. I think innovation is a kind of the answer or the elixir for all of them.

Liggy Webb: Yeah. And if we always do what we've always done, we'll always get the same outcome so we need to think differently, fresh thinking, getting people to really explore different ways of doing it.

I think it's also really important to appreciate that creativity is coming up with all the ideas. Innovation is about the implementation so it's a little bit wider than

just coming up with some fresh thinking and new ideas of doing things is actually taking action on it.

Adam Lacey: Yeah, exactly. I actually would put curiosity before that, so I say curiosity is the spark, creativity is the ideas and then innovation is actually putting that into practice in some way.

Liggy Webb: Curiosity is the engine of innovation. That's for sure.

Adam Lacey: I wanted to mention a couple of business stories here as a kind of cautionary tale for those who don't take this as seriously as I think they should and there are a few that really spring to mind, including brands that I used to use and love and are just no longer around because they failed to innovate. Blockbuster is the big one, so not moving away from that place where you had to go and rent a physical DVD. Netflix soon came and took that market by having no late fees for late returns and stuff like that and Blockbuster just didn't move on it. And they were convinced that the whole using a retail environment was the way forward. BlackBerry is another one, the iPhone and the touchscreen phone came along and BlackBerry stuck to their guns with their keyboard and took way too long to move over to a touchscreen approach.

Kodak is my other favourite one. And I've said this before, but Kodak refused to move into the world of digital cameras because they made all of their money from, not all of their money, but they make most of their money from selling film and so there was a reluctance to move into the digital realm. And the most depressing thing about the Kodak story is that their research and development department actually developed the first digital camera, excuse the pun there, created the first digital camera, and they weren't the ones that brought it to the mass market and Kodak 25, 30 years ago, was an enormous brand and now is very tiny brand compared to other digital camera manufacturers in the market.

Liggy Webb: It's quite sad to think, isn't it, that they were pioneers and then suddenly they get overtaken and they're left behind and, of course, you don't want people there giving themselves a hard time because they weren't innovating so I think innovation is a good way of motivating your teams as well isn't it? It's giving them something to strive for. It's giving them a vision as well so that can be so helpful.

Adam Lacey: Yeah.

Cool. So let's get into how do we role model this as a leader? What are some of the things that we can do and maybe what are some of the things that we shouldn't be doing as well?

Liggy Webb: Certainly, as a leader of innovation, we need to be prepared to take risks so to increase our rate of success, we've got to be prepared to

increase our rate of failure and taking the risks sometimes can be quite challenging.

I think as a leader, having that kind of courage in order to be able to explore and also to be able to see failure as a learning opportunity as well, and being able to communicate that to teams so encouraging teams to take risks as well, to be able to stretch their comfort zone and to be able to explore and to be able to experiment so we need to lead by example in that way.

Adam Lacey: Yeah, definitely. I'm a big fan of this concept of mitigating risks in order to enable innovation because I think it's so, so important. Like you mentioned earlier, creativity is maybe coming up with the ideas and the plan; innovation is then putting that into practice and the more difficult out of the two, being very honest, is always going to be innovating over creativity. Ideas are ten a penny, some are good, some are bad, but actually taking the risk and investing time, money, people, hours, whatever it is, into something new, is really difficult to do and I think the way that you do is by managing the downside and if that's something you are doing, then teaching or modelling that with your team and modelling that process with them is probably one of the most important ways you can get them on board with safe enough space to innovate and make those decisions, because, let's be honest, the less senior you are, maybe the less responsibility you have, the less likely you are to be able to even make those kinds of decisions. That whole safe space and modelling that, "Right, this is what I've thought about. These are risks that I can see. This is how we can mitigate those risks" and actually almost walking your team through that in detail. And that process of "Right, this to me feels like a good risk to take because of these things" is a really powerful way to help enable innovation in your team.

Liggy Webb: Yeah, and it's getting that balance, isn't it, between being that risk taker and having that willingness to explore and have courage and also being to risk averse. I know that I've worked with leaders who come from different ends of that continuum so I remember working with one leader that was so, so risk averse so everything that you presented, they were really sceptical and really fearful and we ended up becoming quite a static team. There was quite a lot of conflict in the team actually, because people started getting bored and then I remember working for a leader years ago that was, oh my goodness. It was like, every time you went to work, it would be, "Oh, what's going to happen today?" because they were constantly pushing the boundaries and it almost felt that they were pushing the boundaries for the sake of pushing the boundaries and we were constantly innovating and we were absolutely exhausted.

I think getting that middle ground and striking balance, which is always the conundrum for all of us in life, isn't it, trying to get that kind of happy balance? But that's something that we do need to be very aware of as leaders. If our preference is to be a big risk taker, you might completely freak your team out if

you're not careful doing that and we don't want to exhaust our team, but if you're very aware that you are very risk averse, being mindful of that. I think it does very much come down to the leader examining where they sit on that continuum of innovation, I guess.

Adam Lacey: I like that internal look or a personal audit on your kind of a tolerance of risk, let's call it that.

Liggy Webb: Yes, and also understanding each and every individual in your team, have a look and do a bit of an audit on where do they sit, are they very risk averse or are they willing to take more risks? I think understanding your team and having the ability to empathise with how they feel about innovation is going to be so helpful.

Adam Lacey: Yeah. Big time. And I feel like trust is a big one here as well. And just trusting in your team to make those decisions that need to be made.

Probably one of the worst things you can do, if we move on to maybe some of the barriers here to role modelling this sort of behaviour, is being dismissive of people that are willing to come up with new ideas or take those risks or do something a bit different, squashing people's dreams, for example, or maybe dismissing things out of hand.

I think there's a very conscious way that you can cultivate innovation, positive, constructive, and a thought-through way. And there are definitely some very quick ways that you can destroy people's confidence and their confidence to take risks and their confidence to innovate. Be very wary of that as well.

Liggy Webb: Yeah, because one of the biggest barriers will be punishing honest mistakes. People are going to innovate that sometimes it's not going to work, and sometimes the outcome isn't going to be as perhaps you'd anticipated, I think two things to bear in mind: one is to not be too rigid in your own approach and micromanaging, because that's something that is a definite barrier and the other one is punishing those honest mistakes. I see too many examples of where organisations say, "We need to encourage a much more innovative culture." Perhaps they have innovation as one of their core values and yet when people do make mistakes, they will punish them or inhibit them to want to innovate more in the future. We do need to be really mindful of that.

Adam Lacey: Yeah, no, that's a really important one, actually, and something that can set your innovation strategy back significantly, just not giving people that safe space to fail.

Let's go on to some of our favourite stories around this topic. Have you got any you want to share, Liggy? I've got a couple actually, both from big business, but also from personal experiences.

Liggy Webb: Yeah, I think I'm going to expand on a bit of a negative story here, and it really just reiterates what I was sharing before about a leader that I used to work with in a team who was very energised, in many ways could be quite inspiring, would get the team really excited but I remember working on this project. We had some really tight deadlines. We had so much pressure from other departments and as a team, we'd collaborated really well. We'd come up with some great ideas. We'd really shaped what we were going to present. And I can remember 48 hours before we were going to deliver and present what we were doing, our leader came into a meeting and said, "Yeah, this is great." Very enthusiastic about what we'd done. But there was a big "but" and it was, "I think we need to do this." And it was just an example of something that he particularly wanted to change. But for all of us, the effect that it had, first of all, it was incredibly demotivating because we'd gone over and above to really deliver in this short deadline.

So yeah, demotivating. And I think also what it did is it really frustrated everybody. You could feel this kind of frustration and in a way it impacted on our trust with this leader because it was, "Well, hang on a sec, you've taken us through this process, but at the last minute you've come in and micromanaged, in a way, that outcome" and it was a combination of all the things that leaders shouldn't do and it felt a bit indulgent as well. That's how I think it came across to the team. So I think if you're setting plans, it's being simple to some degree, but not throwing people at the deep end at the last minute, because that really did have quite a poor effect there.

Adam Lacey: Yes. A really good story. If you're going to come in and change something drastically in a big way you don't do it last minute and also if you absolutely do need to do it at the last minute, if there's something that is major serious that is wrong with what's been done, then there's a way to do it and there's also a bit of humble pie. I think as a leader, you've got to eat and say, "Look, I'm really sorry, but we should have discussed this two days ago, three days ago, beginning of the week, whenever, when we were doing this, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault." And you take the responsibility in that instance. And then you collaborate with your team on a fix for the thing that's in front of you. And like you say, you then as the team don't feel like you've been gazumped or that you're the one that's done anything wrong.

I think, yeah, that's really important. My story is to take us in a slightly different direction. What there's one quite famous one that's always worth mentioning when it comes to and that's Google's '20 Percent Time', because I think one of the things, and we'll talk about in it, but one of the other things that you can proactively do to empower, enable, and develop your team to become more innovative is put things in place that enable innovation and Google's 20 percent time is one of those.

So if you're not aware of it, it's basically Google, I don't know if they still do it actually, but historically they used to allow people 20% of their time, effectively

one working day, to work on a project that they were passionate about, and it might be outside of their immediate remit or job, when they could team up with other people, work on that project. Initially, there weren't many rules about it, so you had people working on side hustles and stuff like that and then eventually I think they brought in a rule that said, "Right, it needs to contribute positively in some way to Google" and put a few safety bars in place. But that's one of the really interesting approaches to innovation is actually, as a company, you step back and you hand people the reins, give them some time and say, "What have you got?"

You hire really good, really smart people, and you let them come up with the innovation and I think that's really strong. And I, from a personal point of view, I never worked at Google, but I did work at quite an innovative British startup when I was a graduate. And one of the things we did wasn't quite the 20 percent time, but we called it a special project so all the grads in this company were brought together and we were basically given a big list of different projects and things that the company wanted to work on, but as a fast-growing startup, they no one had got around to it yet, basically no one tackled each of them. And then we paired off with other grads and we could effectively pick a project to work on.

And we had a little bit of protected time. I don't think it was a huge amount, I dunno, half a day a week or something that we could dedicate to that project so a bit more controlled than the Google approach, but nevertheless, it stuck with me because it allowed me to work with people in the organisation that I hadn't worked with before, allow me to go very cross-departmental. I think the project I was working on was something completely different than my day job and then I had to go and seek that expertise from other people in the business to do a lot of research and talk to a lot of different people that I wouldn't normally talk to as well and the reason they did it was because a lot of the time people in the teams that they were working in got very blinkered or siloed in their vision and in terms of what they were doing and so even if the grads didn't come up with the perfect solution, they might come up with something that's a little bit different because they're coming at it from a completely different point of view.

And I really liked that as a way of enabling innovation within the business and it wasn't difficult to do and actually it was very rewarding being on the receiving end of that, someone early in my career, to get exposure to those different things otherwise I wouldn't have been able to work on.

Okay, cool. So let's move on to what we can proactively do to empower, enable, and develop our people in this skill. We've already started talking about one idea, giving them some time, but Liggy, what have you got for us?

Liggy Webb: Oh yeah, reflection time. I think so often we don't give people the opportunity to just stop and reflect and to think and recalibrate so I think that's definitely really helpful. There is one thing that I would really emphasise when it comes to innovation because one of the things that we're going to rely on for when people are implementing new ideas and new activities and suggestions and experimenting and all those things, we're going to need people to feel energised so energy levels within your team is going to be so important. And I guess this goes to how we support a culture of wellbeing, looking after people, managing stress levels, making sure that people are getting the right kind of balance in their lives so definitely I would put a huge emphasis on managing stress and encouraging that culture of wellbeing.

Adam Lacey: Yeah, I love that. What can you do as a manager to practically to help people manage stress? What would be some of your top tips there, Liggy?

Liggy Webb: I think certainly when it comes to well-being, first of all, it's about being a role model. That's one of the key things is where you have leaders who are role models and they absolutely demonstrate that they're looking after themselves, they're managing their stress levels and they're prioritising self care so definitely being a role model is going to be right at the top of the list there and it's also understanding each and every member of your team, opening up those conversations. When you're saying to somebody, "How are you?" Don't just listen to the first thing that they're going to say; probe a little bit and really find out or people looking after themselves, particularly in a hybrid world of working where sometimes we don't have that visibility to see how people actually are.

Opening up those conversations and finding out how each and every member of your team is, that's going to be really helpful. Something else I did want to mention as well, Adam, that I think is absolutely key to innovation and is definitely an enabler and will help future innovation and that's celebrating success.

Every time we celebrate success, our brain triggers dopamine, which is one of the quartet of happy chemicals and that boosts us and lifts us and helps us to feel better. And I think if we're not careful as a leader, once we've implemented and innovated one thing, we're on to the next thing. And we don't always stop and take time to really celebrate with the team, congratulate them, show appreciation, let them relish in their success.

And particularly because they're going to be sharing that as part of a team and that's a wonderful part of collaborating well for innovation.

Adam Lacey: I'm a big fan of that and those micro-touches in terms of just saying "well done" when you walk past someone's desk if you're in an office or a quick slack message to say "I was really impressed with this", calling people

out publicly as well when they've done something good and innovative and you just reinforcing the kind of behaviour that you want to see and again you're reinforcing that actually is fine to take those risks and I think you do the same thing with failure as well, you reinforce that it's absolutely fine that we failed at this thing, because the important thing is we took the risk and we had a go at it and we tried to innovate and we tried to do something different and even if it didn't work great debrief, learn from it, move on to the next thing, but call out the fact that it's fine to do that as well, don't sort of stick your head in the sand and let people whisper about it behind each other's backs. That's one of the worst kind of things you can situations you can get into. I'm a big fan of all that. And I think as a leader, also, there's an element of what you can do to reduce the risk around innovating for your team so you can make it easier in a lot of ways for them to take those decisions and yes, it's about trust and it's about rewarding, but actually if you can make it easier for people to innovate, be that by giving them time, giving them permission, giving them, I don't know, their own budgets to experiment with stuff, whatever it is in your business that, or in your organisation that then I think look for those opportunities as well.

Liggy Webb: And there's a really lovely post-innovation activity that can be done with a team as well, where you bring everybody together and get each individual member of the team to share some feedback so something that they would share with another team member that they feel would develop them and would be good for their own personal progress and also to deliver a piece of feedback that celebrates something that they've done and what was it that they did and what effect and what impact that had so providing evidence, I think that's really good. Getting into the habit of doing that after every successful innovation, or even every failed innovation can be extremely helpful. I think that's a good habit for leaders to get into with their teams.

Adam Lacey: Yeah, exactly. And it's as simple as weaving it into your weekly team meetings or something like that and I think there's put some structure around it as well, because if you want to encourage and cultivate this kind of behaviour, then actually the onus is on you to keep banging the drum. Naturally, a lot of people will take the least risky option. We're predisposed to that as human beings ever since predators were chasing us through the jungle, we'd look for the least risk we could and yeah, and I think so in order to combat that sometimes there, there needs to be an element of pushing, of reiteration, from you in a leadership position.

Liggy Webb: Yeah, definitely.

Adam Lacey: Cool, Liggy. Let's round off with our personal top three tips.

Liggy Webb: So my top three tips for leading innovation are tip number one: encourage people to experiment and don't punish honest mistakes. I think

that's something we need to be very careful about. Top tip number two is to be a courageous role model.

I think for leaders who face up to what they might be afraid of, and they can identify how they can come over those fears and they can communicate that with their teams as well, then that's going to be very helpful. And finally, top tip number three for leading innovation is definitely celebrate success, what you've achieved, but also celebrate failure as well. What have you learned? Two things there, isn't it? What we achieve and what we learn through that innovative process.

Adam Lacey: Brilliant. And my three are different for a change, which is nice, so completely different. My first one is to reduce risk and I think anything you can do to reduce that risk for your team will enable them and give them the confidence to innovate. Number two, and linked to that, is just trust your team to make decisions. I think that's a big one, and actually pass down some of that decision-making power that maybe you hold and relinquish where you can to help build that confidence.

And number three is probably my favourite one, which is to give people the space to innovate. Give them the time, give them the opportunity, and create the networks. Set up the systems; do whatever you need to do to support that. Give them the space. Great. That's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for listening.

We hope you enjoyed that episode and we'll be back soon with another in our Leading Future Human series.