

Alumni Live Webinar Series

How to prioritise wellbeing in times of crisis

Full Transcript

Moderator

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Co-Hosts

- Marion Listre-Gronier, Industry Head Financial Services, Google Australia
- Katherine Shoobridge, People Experience Partner, PEXA

Brooke: Great, let's get started. So welcome, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us today. It's an absolute pleasure to have you here. We have a very insightful, very action-packed agenda for you. My name is Brooke Taylor, I am the Head of Programs and Operations at The Dream Collective. And I'm joined by two of our fabulous alumni from our signature leadership development program for emerging female leaders and their names are Marion Gronier from Google and Katherine Shoobridge from PEXA. Thank you both for joining us.

So, a little bit of context around why we're here and why we chose this topic for you today. Over the last three weeks, we at The Dream Collective interviewed over a hundred senior managers and executives in our network, and one of the most pressing challenges that kept coming up was how to manage and coach reports to optimize their own wellbeing during times of crisis and while operating remotely. Managers aren't often called specifically to manage their reports to optimize wellbeing, let alone in a digital, remote context. Often, people think that emotional intelligence and coaching has to be done live, which isn't necessarily the case. So, in order to coach people around their wellbeing, in order to optimize wellbeing, the tools that really underpin that are emotional intelligence,

how to have courageous conversations, coaching to resilience, and coaching to a growth mindset. And all of these tools are the pillars of what we teach in our Emerging Leaders Program for emerging female leaders. It's our signature program that we're really proud to say has reached thousands of women across APAC.

So who better to discuss how to manage wellbeing than two of our best graduates? I'll introduce them in a second, but for those of you who are new to The Dream Collective, welcome. We are a global diversity and inclusion consultancy that focuses on helping companies to attract, retain, and advance female leaders. And we do this through training women through our public programs like the Emerging Leaders Program that these two women were a part of. We do that through creating custom training solutions for our corporate clients to address their gender inclusion needs, and to help them advance and retain female talent, and through employer branding.

We're proud not only of the results we get for our clients but of the reach and the impact we've been able to have on the gender inclusion conversation in corporations across APAC. We've empowered over 5,000 emerging female leaders, established an online network of over 12,000 leaders, provided 2,000 hours of leadership development and strategic advisory, and established a really elite and broad network of over 700 business leaders globally. We truly have that global reach and expertise as it comes to what it means to be a leader and how to advance female leaders.

So, who better, really, to share on the topic of coaching to wellbeing than female leaders themselves, the women who've been through our programs? So we have two stellar standout graduates from our ELP program; first, Marion Gronier. Marion completed our ELP program in Sydney last year, and she's been with Google for 13 years. Currently, she's an Industry Head in Financial Services. She has deep experience in building and leading high performing teams and is very passionate about coaching her team members to help them achieve their goals. Marion cares very deeply about five key dynamics of an effective team, which are; psychological safety, dependability, clarity, meaning, and impact, which are all key skills that we teach and that we think are more important now than ever.

We're also joined by Katherine Shoobridge. Katherine was a standout participant in our Melbourne Emerging Leaders Program in February. She's worked at Property Exchange

Australia, that's PEXA, for almost five years, holding her position as People Experience Partner for the last three. She has a wealth of knowledge and experience in HR, and she's passionate about supporting leaders and employees to develop cultures that enable people to do their best work, which is absolutely required in this environment.

A little bit about me, the person who will be moderating this conversation, my name is Brooke Taylor. Again, I'm the Head of Programs and Business Excellence & Operations for The Dream Collective. I'm also a former Googler — I was at Google for six years, in New York, before moving to Australia and kind of putting all my cards on the table around empowering emerging female leaders through career coaching, business coaching, and through leadership development programs at The Dream Collective.

So without further ado, I will go into our first question. I would like you to also note that you can use the Q&A function to ask follow-up questions if you'd like (the Q&A function on Zoom), and I will do my best to tease those out. And I'll be asking follow-up questions as well. So if you have any additional questions to ask, feel free to put them in the Q&A box. But we have four questions to address in the next 45 minutes, so we'll get into it. So this first one, I'd like Marion to start on and then, Katherine, you can jump in. How have you been prioritizing your own wellbeing and energy at this time?

Marion: Hi, everyone. I can't see you on the screen, but great to meet you over Zoom. So I have three boys aged eight, six, and two and a half. Everybody's home at the moment because their schools are closed, the daycare is closed, so they are all home. I've also taken this new position since last week, and my husband's also working full time from home. So it is very full-on at the moment, and it's never been more important to manage my wellbeing and my energy than right now.

Now a little bit about when I started my career, I actually started in a creative agency in Paris, and in my first year in the agency, I saw so many people in burnout, and that actually had a profound impact on me because I saw where I never wanted to get to, and I swore to myself that I'd do everything I could to never be in this position of burning out and that if one day I became a manager and a leader, it would be a failure of me as a leader or manager to have someone doing a burnout in my team. So that's really, really important to me since the early stages of my career.

So, in managing my wellbeing and my energy at the moment time, I think one thing that is really important is being very self-aware about what's important for you, and recognize signs of stress and of being overwhelmed. So because wellbeing's always been really important to me, I'm quite clear on my priorities, I'm quite clear on what's very important to me. So the things that are important to me are, number one; sleep. I would put that first. I would prioritize sleep over anything else, even if my work isn't finished because it's never finished, you can work 24 hours, but you cannot work if you're tired. So sleep is the number one thing, then exercise and different forms of relaxation.

Now, I believe in routines and structure, and often, it's hard with kids because they don't care about routines and structures, but it's also important to them. So I try to have a routine and a structure – the same routine that I have when I work from the office. I get up at the same time, I exercise in the morning, and things change around that because now I start with the girls, and so we adapt around that. But I also communicate that with my family, I tell them about the routine and the structure and it keeps me a little sane, and also, it gives them a guide and they understand what's going on.

So, I exercise in the morning, I love yoga and in a normal week, I would try to go once a week at a minimum, but I find myself now doing it every day at home, even if it's just for 20 minutes, whenever I can, I just need it even more. Because in a normal week, you'd have ups and downs, you'd have like days that are up and days that are down, but I find, in this environment, it's on an hourly basis where you have ups and downs, and it's important to recognize those signs.

Brooke: Thank you. Yeah, absolutely, what you just touched on at the end is around being self-aware around your own energy, and then self-regulate that.

Marion: One thing that I do if I find my energy levels going down throughout the day, usually after lunch, is I just put my headphones on and go for a walking meeting instead of sitting at my desk, I go around the block, and just signal it to the person who I'm speaking to that I need to go for a walk. And it's actually really good. Like, you're even more into it because you're just listening and are even more carefree. So I kind of like these walking meetings, and I have, minimum, one a day.

Brooke: Excellent, thank you. And Katherine, how have you been prioritizing your own wellbeing and, specifically, why is that so important to your performance and your role as a leader and a manager?

Katherine: Thank you so much for having me, first of all. So, this is the fifth week that we've been working from home. PEXA started working from home probably a couple of weeks before it was really required. But I've been quite used to working from home throughout the time that I've been working there, and I just echo what Marion said about routine. So, for me, I live in a one-bedroom apartment in inner-city Melbourne, with my cat, who is very authentic and has decided to join me today. And so for me, the routine was really important. As a People Experience Partner, a lot of my day can be quite reactive, so I'm used to dealing with people face to face. So really making sure that I have that routine has been really important.

So exercising, absolutely agree with going out for walking meetings and also creating a buffer time between starting work in the morning and life, and also at the end of the day, is really important. What I found particularly helpful in that is actually having a dedicated space in my apartment, which, for me, is just my desk in the corner of my lounge room. But it's enough because, at the end of the day, I can put everything away and step away and then I'm in life mode. That's been really helpful.

Exercise is also really important because it is easy without the commute time back and forth to switch on pretty early and then kind of work till whatever hour. So making sure that I'm taking care of my mental health as well – mindfulness, gratitude, meditation, also limiting the amount of media consumed. For us at PEXA, we've had a response group, so a group of people who have been really across all of the announcements and helping our employees to work through that, but that can be a little bit draining. So just cutting down the time that I'm listening to media to 30 minutes a day has been really helpful. Yeah, I think they're probably the key things around managing energy.

For me, apart from that, just doing all of the other things I would normally do like eating well, sleeping at as regular as you can times, and not being too hard on yourself when things do change and challenges do come up as well. So, that's probably been how I've

been managing it. Being very deliberate about it, I think, is really important because it's not something that is natural to any of us, I don't think, yet.

Brooke: Sounds like you're setting a really good precedent and example for your team. So let's talk a little bit more practically about how you've been managing the wellbeing of your team, especially in this remote context. So, Katherine, I might start with you. What specific ways have you been managing your team's wellbeing and coaching them around that?

Katherine: So being a PX Partner puts me in the kind of unique position that we're always thinking about the entire PEXA team as our team, as well, of course, as our closer PX team. So, as a business (and I'd say it was the same for the team), it was really about initially establishing communication channels that provided structure to people at a very ambiguous time – so setting up Slack channels dedicated to providing company updates – and then at a team level, figuring out what worked for the team. Everyone had very unique circumstances and continues to have unique circumstances this week with the introduction of schooling from home and all of those additional challenges, so really recognizing that and doing whether it's converting your standups to virtual check-ins online or whatever it might be. Certainly, initially, in the first weeks, we found that more communication was better than less, and we've been able to kind of pull that back over time as we've got more into a rhythm for remote working.

Something else has been really helpful for our internal team and team members has been really catering those communications, so providing support to people leaders about how to look after their teams and their team members. And our employee assistance program, Assure, has been really wonderful in that way. So we've done some webinars with them and we've really been promoting to look after your mental health and wellbeing.

The other thing that has been really helpful has been keeping connected – we're a very open-plan office in our environment, so having that kind of the same culture online as well; so translating that into the way that we interact in Slack channels. And for our team, we've got a photo of the day and yesterday, it was actually set by my colleague, Megan, her son, Ari, who's three, at home, and he wanted to see a photo of a duck, so we all had to get really creative about how we could do that. But I think that that's really been the most

important thing – continuing to just recognize everyone's individual circumstances and adapt as we need to.

The only last thing I'd say that's been really helpful is our CEO has had a really open communication channel with the business and anyone can ask him questions, anonymously, any time, and he answers them in a weekly video, which I think has provided people with a lot of comfort about what's happening and that it is business as usual even though it's definitely not normal times.

Brooke: Sounds like your company's really emphasized transparency, communication processes, support, and even institutionalized a lot of these things.

Katherine: Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Brooke: Excellent. And Marion, and friend, would you like to share about that?

Marion: I'm sorry, of course she has decided to walk in.

Brooke: It's real life. It's totally fine.

Marion: Well, it's hard to add anything to that because it was a really comprehensive answer from Katherine. I absolutely echo all those points. I think what's really important at the moment is to have that psychological safety. Having that psychological safety with your team is really, really important. And it's not something that you create overnight, so it's something that you have been building towards for a longer time because it takes time to create that. But I think now, more than ever, it is really important because wellbeing is so personal. It takes a lot for your team members to open up to you about what that means to them and how you can help them. It's very, very personal.

And to give you an example, every quarter, we have to build our OKRs – so our personal objective key results – and then there is a chapter that we're being given by the business. This quarter is a little bit different. One of the OKRs that we have added in is a wellbeing OKR, so making sure that everyone has a wellbeing OKR. Now, it's up to them if they want to share it or not, and it's absolutely fine. It's a conversation that you have with your manager. I think the role of the manager is to help them stay accountable for that OKR and to put in place the elements so that they can commit to this OKR and they can deliver

on it. So even if they don't feel comfortable sharing it, it's absolutely fine. But, at least, you know what you can do to help them and support them with this OKR.

The other thing I would add is, understanding everybody's personal circumstances is really, really important at the moment. And again, it takes a lot of listening, and a lot of questioning, and a lot of also understanding and empathy in terms of where to also stop.

And then all the points that Katherine talked about in terms of daily check-ins. If you don't have those chance meetings in the office, so you need to create more opportunities to be able to check-in and not just talk about work. And it's important to create that more regularly. We also have our MD, who, throughout the day, will just randomly contact people, just check in on them and see how they're doing.

Brooke: That's nice. What is some very specific language that you've used, Marion, to create an environment where a report who might not be accustomed to opening up, or perhaps is new to the team, that you can use to help get them to open up or share a little bit more?

Marion: I ask questions around, how are you feeling at the moment? How does working from home make you feel? What can I do to support you at the moment? What is important for you in the coming weeks? So, this kind of language around the feelings, the emotions, and the support that we can offer.

Brooke: Thank you. We have a follow-up question, and I might shoot this one over to Katherine and then Marion. Where people are under pressure and feeling the strain of working remotely, how do you help them prioritize their own wellbeing? Perhaps, if you could use some specific language that you would use to empower your reports to take on and prioritize wellbeing?

Katherine: I think really understanding what it is that's going on. So, for me, if anyone ever expressed something like that, like "I'm feeling stressed, I'm feeling under pressure", really trying to understand the problem so that you can help the person work through it. So for example, at the moment, in our business, we have some people, like in our team even, who are left with less work than they would normally have because their roles are a

bit different, whereas we have other teams that are really, really busy. So it's about being able to pivot and support them.

So, I guess, echoing some of the questions that Marion used around, what do you feel would help you right now? What support could I provide you? What would make this easier for you at the moment? If there was one thing that would help, what would it be? You know, just really trying to understand what the problem is and then work through it from there.

Marion: I think I'd try to break it down; is it related to expectations at work? Is it related to what's going on in your personal life? Or is it everything together that's been overwhelming? What are you doing right now? What does your day look like? When do you feel overwhelmed? How do you feel when you get those feelings coming up? And then asking how we can help. And then if we have to review expectations, it's absolutely fine. It's not BAU and I think we have to accept that.

Brooke: I think that point around resetting expectations is absolutely crucial because we are in a new environment and so people who are overachievers might not know what good looks like in this context. And, perhaps, a really great way to get somebody to prioritize something is to say, "this is what good looks like". Good looks like taking care of yourself and your wellbeing. And to the fact that it's an OKR for Google sounds like that really is an expectation. Is that right?

Marion: Yeah, absolutely. It's really important. I don't know how long this is going to go on for, but we know it's going to be a few more weeks. It's a marathon, and wellbeing is really, really important if we're here for the longer game or mid-term game.

Brooke: Another follow-up question, Katherine I might go to you. Beyond questioning and coaching, do you have any specific strategies or actual examples to share? And I think what this person means is, how are people prioritizing their wellbeing? I know you both mentioned strategies that work for you, but what examples are you giving your reports to show them what prioritizing your wellbeing actually looks like?

Katherine: Leading by example, I think is really important. So if you're saying to your teams, make sure you get out and get some air and exercise, and whatever it might be,

going out and doing that yourself and having video meetings while you're having a walk, or getting outside, getting some air is really important.

A big one for us at the moment is hours. So people are working different hours depending on what's working for them, and particularly with caring responsibilities. So one of the things that we've really thought about and put in place is that that's okay if someone's firing off emails, and it's really early in the morning or it's late at night, as long as, obviously, they're not working extreme hours. We definitely have examples of that at the moment. It's really about, people are doing their best, and that's really the key message that we've been providing as examples for people is, just do what works for you. And, obviously, there is more support if things need to change a bit more, but everyone is doing the best they can and there is not kind of a perfect way to approach it in every situation.

Marion: Yeah, I would echo that on leading by example. I take 9-11am every morning off because I'm doing homeschooling for the girls. So that's blocked in my calendar and I try to really stick to that time – actually, I have no choice because otherwise, they are not learning, so I need to stick to that.

The other thing that I have done – but I've had that for a while in my signature, so that's not specific to COVID-19, it was something I had previously – at the bottom of my signature, I have a little disclaimer that says that if you receive an email from me outside of the 9-5, it's not because I expect immediate response, it's because flexibility is really important to me, and I had to prioritize other things throughout the day, like my children, for instance, or maybe I left work earlier, and therefore I'm sending emails outside of the 9-5. But I'm not expecting immediate response at all. So it's something that I have in my signature that I think helps set the right tone for my team.

Brooke: It sounds like managing expectations, resetting expectations, asking your reports, have you been outside today? Can we do a walking one-on-one/ can you make that meeting a walking one-on-one? And asking if they're being careful around their hours and really checking in with people around them.

Marion: Yeah, exactly. And if you see emails coming in, like, late at night, the next morning, you check-in, see if they are okay. You have to be mindful as well so you're not sort of invading their privacy too much because there's only so much that they're willing

to share with you. But I think just being curious and asking questions is really important. Caring, I think, is the key.

Brooke: Yeah, absolutely. So what specific leadership qualities have proven most crucial at this time for you? Let's start with Katherine.

Katherine: Empathy is probably the biggest one, especially for myself. I don't have children and there's so many changes that I'm not experiencing. I'm very lucky that I don't have any family that are affected by this, but a lot of people do. So just empathy, really trying to put myself in other people's shoes and think from their perspective about what's going on. And if there is something I don't understand, checking it with people who do. Like, for example, communications that we're sending out to parents, making sure that it is really resonating with people, that we are really capturing all of the perspectives that we need to. How am I sending things out is really important.

Otherwise, I would say strategic thinking. So it is a marathon, absolutely. And we don't know how long that it's going to go for at this stage. For us at PEXA, we're going to be working like this until at least the end of April. So we have a kind of roadmap for how long we're going to be home at this stage, but that may change. So being adaptable with that, as well as thinking through how long this could last, and being mindful of things like wellbeing, given that it is a marathon, and setting up things for yourself that are sustainable.

Marion: Yes, the other quality to add to that is courage as a leader, and I think that's where it's true for people who either who manage teams, but also for anyone because anyone can be a leader, you don't have to manage people to be a leader. But I think it takes courage to share, and I've said that before, but to share your personal circumstances, to share what's going on with you. As a leader, you need to lead by example, you need to be comfortable being authentic because we've all invited everyone into our homes, and sometimes it's not super comfortable, but I think this courage to listen, to understand what people are telling you, to show empathy. Some questions aren't easy to ask and some answers aren't easy to hear, but it's really, really important at this point in time.

Brooke: Couldn't agree more. And you both touched on elements of emotional intelligence, which we did a deep dive into in our program where you got your report, and you touched on courageous conversations specifically, too. So I love that.

Marion: Yeah, the other one I'd say is it's even more important to have good communication skills at the moment. Zoom calls aren't easy. They're not easy for people to jump in, it's not as natural. You need to dial-up this communication even more. You need to be even more engaging over a Zoom call, you need to find other ways of communicating regularly without sending lots more emails. Naturally, you will have a lot more emails coming in, that's because we don't have those more natural communication channels that we have in the office. So, I think as long as you signal all of these things it's fine, but it's also an opportunity for leaders to dial-up their communication skills and how they engage with their teams.

Brooke: What's one example or tool you've used specifically to improve your communication during this time? Putting you on the spot, Katherine.

Katherine: I think test and learn. We have a bunch of different tools that we use internally – Teams, Slack, email, – and it's kind of just testing what works as well, what gets the most engagement. Our CEO video started out as an email, which was not that engaging when you're virtual. So, just making decisions, learning, trying something else, seeing what resonates.

Marion: What we're doing in our daily huddles in the morning is we're doing a quick thumbs-up, thumbs-down, thumbs in the middle, to check how everyone is doing. And, again, there are days where even though I was the one asking, "how's everyone feeling", I was not feeling good myself and I shared that with the teams. And other days where some people, I could see, had their thumbs in the middle. I just reached out to them afterward and said, "do you want to have a virtual lunch? Let's catch up, I'm here for you", even if they're not in my direct teams, but the extended team as well. So things like that. Actually, today, we have a 5pm cocktail hour with the teams. So virtual cocktails, virtual lunches, we do dress up in some of our Zoom calls, which is always really fun.

Brooke: Thank you.

Katherine: Yeah, we have a few games as well, like show and tell and things like that, which have been really helpful. I guess the only other thing I would add as well is, it can be really tempting when things are really ambiguous to do a lot more. And I think that I would say that there are definitely things that can help and structures that you can put in place. But it's also okay to take it as a time to pause too, and particularly, as a leader, where you're doing a lot more just to care for your teams. Your self-care is really important as well, so don't always feel like you have to do kind of more and implement more things. Think about the impact that that has on your teams as well.

Brooke: Around resetting expectations, let's head into our last question. So perhaps one-minute answers from both of you, and we'll take some follow-up questions if anybody wants to type any into the Q&A chat. How are you navigating conversations around performance with your team during this time when productivity might not be as high?

Marion: I'm happy to start with that one. So, in a normal environment, we have quarterly OKRs at Google. So we're doing the same thing here. We have OKRs, but we have really honest and transparent conversations about sort of scoping those OKRs in this quarter. What does that look like for you, given your personal circumstances? And given what you are able to do, what does performance look like?

I think we're lucky that we got guidance from our headquarters on that, so everybody's on the same page. We just have to accept that it's not BAU. It's not the normal circumstances and we can accept that some people will be able to have the same level of productivity and output, but for others, it will be really, really difficult. And that's why we have teams as well – we can redeploy resources and we can make sure that we help our team members.

Katherine: Yeah, definitely. I think being clear on expectations because they may have, and likely have, changed and I know there are a number of things within our team as well. Our PX team also involves events, so there are a number of things we had to pivot to be able to still reach our members. So having open conversations about that, I think is really important. Also using virtual tools to stay across work. We have a weekly standup with our team, and now we use a Trello board to keep everyone up to date, as opposed to our physical wall, which has been really helpful.

And the other thing I would say is being available for people to kind of just drop in. It's not specific to performance, but if you have some time per day where you are dedicated and available to answer people's questions, I think that can be really helpful as well if anyone has any individual concerns about their workload or whatever that might be.

Brooke: Excellent. Thank you. One follow-up question and then we'll wrap. What's the one thing that your company has implemented during this time that made the biggest difference or impact for your team? I'll give you a moment to think, and whoever is ready can jump in.

Marion: I think for us, it is how quickly our leadership team has pivoted and has provided guidance in terms of what the pivot would be. I think we were able to do that in Australia because this situation unfolded a couple of months beforehand in China and in the rest of Asia. So we had learnings from these markets and I think that was something that was really well done and it provided a little more certainty and clarity to the team straight away in the first week.

Like in every company, I'm sure, there was a little bit of panic for everyone, a little bit of excitement of things being new, working from home, but that quickly went to "what do we do now?". The fact that they pivoted really quickly and provided guidance of expectations, guidance of what performance looks like in this new environment, what our targets are going to be, what our expectations are going to be, I think that's made a massive difference.

Katherine: I would say the most impactful thing has been the communication. So, we are a company where we have a really open-plan office, a lot of conversations on the floor, and so people are really used to being across information all the time. And just the way the crisis team has come together and delivered communications in those very early weeks when things were changing really rapidly, and then how our leaders have really taken that and had such a caring approach with their teams and been communicating through checkins. Yeah, I think communication can't be underestimated. Whatever that looks like to you – whether it's about resetting expectations, whether it's about pivoting where you are, whether it's how are you, how are you feeling, how's your family, how's everything, how are you copying? I think the communication that the business had promoted has been

really, really powerful to make people feel as comfortable as they can in a really uncertain time.

Brooke: Excellent. Thank you. Thank you both. So we're heading into the final two minutes of our 45 minutes together, and I thought I'd just recap a couple of the themes that I've heard. Really around creating your own schedule to prioritize wellbeing for yourself. Encouraging your team to create their own schedule to prioritize wellbeing. Coaching effectively seems to be done through asking enough questions and asking them for not only what they need but providing ideas and solutions because a lot of people might not know what they need during this time. Sounds like resetting expectations is a really clear way for people to have anxiety mitigated so they know what is expected of them. Sounds like both your companies did a really great job from a corporate communications and internal communications standpoint to do that. But also the way that you that in your one-on-ones is really, really clear. It also sounds like empathy, so actually, check-in calls with parents and designing empathy into your processes is really key, as well as adaptability and flexibility. And most importantly, courage – the courage to have these difficult conversations. So, we will recap all the rich insights and tools and skills that you both shared with us today, so thank you so much.

Kind of a quick call to action, when we end this, all the participants will receive a feedback survey. That feedback survey isn't just about what was done today, but it's a call for any additional questions or topics that you'd like to hear from us around. We have a really rich network of women like Marion and Katherine who are happy to jump on at any point and share these with you. So please, use us and use our network. We will continually improve our webinar experience, thank you so much for participating. And with that, thank you both, thank you all for attending.

Marion: Thanks, everyone.

Katherine: Thank you so much.

Marion: Everybody, have a wonderful day.

Brooke: Take care.