

## **Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript**

**Denise:** Today, I'm talking to Leigh Dunlop. She is the Chief People Officer at Future Super. She's had a career in HR ever since doing her Honours degree in psychology at UNSW, and I'm excited to talk to her today. Hi, Leigh.

**Leigh:** Hi, Denise. Thanks for having me.

**Denise:** Thanks for being here. So, let's get right into your job. You are a Chief People Officer. Can you explain what that is?

**Leigh:** Yeah for sure. So, I work at Future Super. We're an impact Superfund so we don't invest in fossil fuels or gambling tobacco, and we want to create a future free from climate change inequality. At Future Super, in my role as Chief People Officer, I oversee the HR, what we traditionally perhaps refer to as the HR function within the business, as well as some of our sort of more practical business operations and sort of office side of things. So, I oversee our recruitment, succession, planning, engagement, anything really that falls under the banner of sort of people management, leadership, training and development and the like. So, I work with a really close knit team and have been there for just on or just over rather three years.

**Denise:** Great, so, I imagine you probably have to do a few other jobs in HR before you got to this role, is that right?

**Leigh:** Yes, just a couple.

**Denise:** Can you tell me what that's been like because I think people who are graduating with a psych degree and might be interested in HR might wonder what that progression is like.

**Leigh:** Yeah no for sure, so I actually did a degree before psychology. I did a Bachelor of social science and policy majoring in criminology because I thought that that's what I was interested in. But I realized sort of towards the end that I wanted to do psych. So, I did my psych degree. I did my Honours and by that stage I've been at uni for about seven years, and I just needed a little bit of a break, if I'm being really honest, and a friend referred me for a role at which Herbert Smith Freehills, which is a commercial law firm, in their graduate recruitment team. So, I'd be sort of doing graduate recruitment, overseeing their clerk intake and their graduate intakes, and also doing and so organizing some social events for the Sydney office and a few bits and pieces as well. So, it's a real mixed bag, but sort of in keeping with what I've done because I volunteered quite a bit at university so was, uh, yeah sort of a continuation of some of the things I've done at university. But my psych degree actually allowed me to satisfy one of the primary requirements for the role, that being sort of degree either in HR or related discipline.

**Denise:** Are you saying that to get a role in HR, a degree in psychology particularly helpful?

**Leigh:** Where there is like a, uh, what I've often seen is where there is a requirement in order to have like a tertiary degree. Now they have, you know they have business degrees majoring in HR and there's like a whole wealth of different degrees you can sort of do, but psychology is definitely considered one of the ways that you have a psych degree. I mean, there might be some businesses that say you need, a strict X degree, but certainly in the roles that I've seen, a related or a degree in a related discipline, psychology being one of them, is certainly enough to sort of tick that box and meet that requirement. So

## **Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript**

that was sort of what allowed me to, alongside my other experience, I would like to think as well, but certainly I don't think I would have gotten through the door were it not for sort of the fact that I'd done a psych degree. So, I started up in that role with the intention of being there for about 18 months and I was going to go back and do my Clinical Masters and now sort of 11 years later, I haven't quite made it back to do my Clinical Masters, but....

**Denise:** What happened there?

**Leigh:** Yeah, so, I really enjoyed the role. I never considered that I would have liked HR if I'm being honest, so it was the fact that her friend referred me for the role and actually quite enjoyed it. I enjoyed interacting with a whole heap of different people, thinking about their motivations, thinking about their energy, and sort of what drives them. And I remember one of my mentors I was speaking to her about like, just rail railing against the idea of being in HR, because I think my experience with HR people had been like 'fill in this form' and, just there to sort of curtail fun, and create processes is needlessly, and so I just didn't want to be a part of that. And she said, 'you know people spend so much of their waking lives at work and you want people to come and feel supported and to actually enjoy the work that they do, and HR can be a large part of that.' And that was a really helpful reframe for me and how I thought about my job. And so, yeah, at Herbert Smith Freehills, I was in the grad recruitment for sort of a couple of years, I moved into a generalist role and I supported different lawyers or different practice groups across the business. So, each time I moved into a different role it was like starting afresh. So, I was there for quite a while, but because I held a number of different positions supporting different groups, it kept things sort of... I certainly didn't stagnate and I kept developing and sort of meeting new people, learning how they worked. A partnership, a legal partnership, is quite interesting in so far as that if you have 200 partners, you have 200 owners of the business, so if you consider the sort of the skills that you need in order to sort of influence, I suppose owners of the business. Normally you're dealing with one boss. I was dealing with, if I was dealing with practice group, 20 or 30 different bosses, and so it was really interesting to sort of just try and negotiate, influence, build those relationships and so I definitely think my study and also just my thinking across my time at university when I was doing my psych degree really helped in that way because you're in there trying to influence and get people to sort of get people on board with an issue you might be running or you know helping to support people. So yeah, so at the time when I was at Herbert Smith Freehills, I did consider whether or not I wanted to go back and do my Clinical Masters. I know it's very different, but I went and volunteered for Lifeline for about sort of 18 months or close to two years I think. And I know that is not what being a clinical psychologist is about, but I sort of dipped my toe into a little bit of I guess counselling work in that way, noting that it is very different, and I thought actually, I'm really enjoying the work that I'm doing and I get a lot of energy out of it and it's really, there's a really great variety. I mean, you're dealing with people and people are not sort of consistent. Or like that sounds bad... but you know different things come up all the time. It's no two days at the same, and so as a result I actually decided to stay on in my HR sort of career I suppose. So, I sort of fell into it, but psychology allowed me to fall into it and I've really enjoyed it ever since. And then how I came to be sort of my current role at Future Super, I came across in it sort of ahead of people and cultural role. A friend was working there. So, I'd never worked in a start-up environment before. So, I went from you know there was 800 people in Sydney office at my old job and then I moved across into a company that was about 22 people, I think. A very different environment, but have really enjoyed at

## **Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript**

basically creating and building a HR sort of function from scratch and actually thinking about how we want to like what given it so small. We've grown now, but given it's so small, I have the autonomy to go in and sort of implement things that I think it can really make a meaningful difference to people without sort of some of the bureaucracy I think that comes from working in a larger organization.

**Denise:** Absolutely. I imagine that also as you've gone through your career, as you've progressed, and now that you're in this kind of a smaller environment, would I be right to say that your roles in HR have shifted more away from the kinds of, you know, fill out this application paper, sort of HR functions and more and more into strategy and strategizing, and culture building?

**Leigh:** Yeah. Yes, so certainly within a small organization. Also, I guess the nature of my role as Chief People Officer, I do work very closely with our CEO. I speak regularly to our board. I work with our executive leadership team and we consider the strategic direction of the business and what we need to do across the business, but particularly in my case it from a people perspective in order to get us there. So that's sort of I guess, working or building up a very different sort of muscle, because I guess early on any HR career, like a lot of careers you start up, there's a lot of sort of.... you gotta learn the ropes. And some of you know some of it's boring and some of it's sort of spreadsheets and some fits paperwork and it's just kind of par for the course. But the way that I sort of work in the things that I'm thinking about now a very different, as you said, very strategic and just like really exciting actually. I get to like I'm really like I look at the projects that I've got on my plate at the moment and really, the problem that I have instead of time and capacity in order to sort of focus on them, not because I'm like no, I don't want to do that, or I don't want to do that. The problem is I actually don't have enough time in the day just to focus on the full breadth of them. So, it's pretty cool.

**Denise:** What's the most exciting part of your job do you think at the moment?

**Leigh:** What's the most exciting well, something that I'm I've been thinking a lot over the last... well, there's two things I think that I've been thinking about quite a lot over the last couple of weeks. One is around energy and engagement, so there's been a lot said, you know we're coming up this, you know it's been a long sort of 18 months, almost two years now there's been lockdown, there's been home schooling. You know it's huge. And so how do we manage and support our employees through to the back end of the year and sort of to really set everyone up well? And you know, make sure that they're energized and feeling supported because, yeah, as I said, it's been a long sort of 18 months and people are just kind of like dragging. And so it's like, what can we do as an employer to support people through this period.

**Denise:** I was just going to ask because I'm interested and I think it might shed even more light on the kinds of things that you do in your role. What kinds of things can you do through an HR function to help energize people engage them?

**Leigh:** Yeah, for sure. Well, right now I'm just going to talk about, sort of.... We run a quarterly engagement survey for our staff and we measure our employee Net Promoter score, which is the question you've probably been asked before, which is like how likely would you be to recommend, in this case, Future Super as an employer to a friend or family member. And so we monitor that quarterly

## Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript

and we look at where we're sort of dipping down and trying to sort of run focus groups or something like that. So, for the first time last year, we always used to look at overall NPS like just as a business, but we decided to cut it up by a few diversity metrics, so gender and cultural diversity. And we found that we had sort of, and I'm using very binary language, but women were less engaged and those who identified, self-identified as culturally diverse were less engaged. And off the back of that and focus groups with those sort of like populations, that's a strange way to phrase it, but within the business and we ran it with our super genders group, which focuses on needs of super genders, and we ask them what are all the things we can do to make you feel sort of more engaged and supported as a business. Um, lots of big things came up. There a big push within our business for full pay transparency, so that's something I've done a lot of thinking about, which is quite interesting. But we track our gender and diversity or like gender, cultural diversity metrics, monthly we report on our gender pay gap and our cultural pay gap and our team help us keep accountable. But one of the things that came up from one of those working groups was that they really wanted or thought it would be good to have menstrual and menopausal leave for business. And I went, yeah, and we're a pretty progressive workforce, and so I recognize I'm very lucky when I say this, and I looked at that and I said that's some low hanging fruit that we can put in place very quickly in order to show the team that we've listened and go on and sort of look at some of these bigger items. So, like rectifying our gender pay gap. So, when I first started our gender pay gap, overall gender pay gap was at about sort of 28% and we're now tracking within target. We're generally around sort of 3% to 4%, still in favour of men, but we've got a target of plus or minus 5% either way. And so, I just to get to do some really cool stuff to come in and make some really meaningful differences. For example, to the gender pay gap and cultural diversity within the team. But yeah, so we implemented menstrual and menopausal leaves and that got a lot of attention, not just within the business, but externally as well. People were really interested. And that, along with another a number of other sort of initiatives that we put in place, saw our engagement levels, particularly for women, sort of jump up from a I think was about 38% to like 62%. So you know, huge shift. So, getting to look at how the team is going and figure out what we could do that would be meaningful to them in order to better support them. And some other things implemented during my time here is mental health leave. And we now have our mental health guidelines that are in draft out to the team for review and feedback. And then they're going to be going through so, yeah, maybe I'm just a bit of a HR nerd at this point, but like they make tangible differences to people and sort of their working lives and that's where I get a lot of energy from. In case you couldn't tell by the fact that I'm just going on about it.

**Denise:** I love that. No, it's good. You clearly do like your job a lot and that's wonderful. What I heard a lot from that answer, it made me think, that you're obviously using psychology by thinking about people and helping people generally. But you're also doing it in a way that's really structural and organizational, and it's also social and cultural. It's also requiring business knowledge and leadership skills, so it's it sounds like your job is at the crossroads of a lot of different kinds of fields you might study or professions you might work in that are all aimed at helping people. It's not one of those things. It's all of those things. Does it feel that way?

**Leigh:** It does, and I recall whenever I would do back at uni when you like, you'd have the org psych students who'd some sort of surveys like you'd get like some sort of credit points or whatever it was. Sorry, I'm definitely using the wrong terminology, but I remember doing a lot of like surveys like what

## Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript

career path like is good for you and where your strengths and helping people did always come out very consistently actually towards the top. And I think it's sort of reflected in not just I, I guess where I've ended up from a career perspective, but also I did quite a bit of volunteering. I did a lot of volunteering within uni. I continue that outside of uni, to volunteer for food banks and the rural fire service. I'll just go say to your point around crossroads, yes, HR can be at the intersection. And you can have people with very different backgrounds or sort of be drawn to the industry. And some bring very sort of different focuses, then sort of come with a particular interest, so there's a lot of different I, I guess specializations within HR that you can sort of look to go down. Diversity and inclusion, remuneration and benefits, you can have sort of a more sort of generalist HR, and there's recruitment. There's a lot of sort of different areas of interest, but I sort of sit, particularly because I'm in a small organization, on top all of that. So, I get to sort of dabble, I suppose, for want of a better word, in a lot of different kinds of types of works and projects across the day.

**Denise:** You mentioned that you still volunteer and that you have volunteered a lot and I'd like to talk a little bit more about the wanting to help people sort of push and drive that you have because I think people who are interested in studying psychology or are studying psychology probably also share that drive that they want to help people. When you were in school, you said that you, you know you were working in an HR role and you're also volunteering with Lifeline. And both of those are ways to help people. How did you find the them to be quite different? What's the difference in the way you're helping people? Because I think for people who are questioning whether they want to go into clinical psychology or do something else like work in HR or organizational psych, they might also be wondering what's really the difference in feeling that you get from helping people in one way or the other.

**Leigh:** Yeah, I think for me, if I reflect on particularly with Lifeline, I was working in HR and then I volunteered it at night. So sometimes you do like a four-hour shift at the end of what might have been a particularly draining day. But Lifeline felt like, yes, it was meaningful, but it felt perhaps more transactional than my day-to-day work because I had established relationships. You build up, you build up trust, you build up rapport, and you can really, sort of, I think, help create meaningful change or provide meaningful support to people that it's sort of, you know, at a day-to-day or week in, week out, sort of level, whereas with Lifeline, and I know if you were a clinical psychologist you'd build up a relationship I suppose with your patients, but with Lifeline I was talking to people for about 18-20 minutes and then you know some people would call back and you sort of people who would repeatedly call because calling Lifeline was one of the things that they did in order to sort of ensure that they felt supported, but by and large it was sort of just you came into this person's life for a very short period of time and then you step back out of it. Whereas for me being able to build up these relationships and have people... A lot of my friends are surprised. Sometimes I can be quite inappropriate and so a lot of my friends are like, how do you work in HR and like, how have you not been fired, which I just try to take as a backhanded compliment. But, I've often had people remark we they're like, oh, you're not what I thought HR would be like and people would come and sit in my office and be like 'I just need a moment,' or they walk in and burst into tears or walk in and rage at the world. And sort of just being able to listen and be there for them in that moment, I knew that it had helped them in their day, and so that's where I sort of drew energy from.

## Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript

**Denise:** Yeah, that was really helpfully because what I what I got from that is that the way you feel about working in HR allows you to help people in many different ways over a longer period of time. And also, what I was picking up was you got to have different kinds of roles in your job, so you can be different versions of yourself in a way that maybe you can't when you have a very specific clinical relationship or when you just see someone for 18 minutes or talk to them and that's it. And that was that was helpful for me to understand sort of the way that it would feel different in helping people in one context or in the other. I'd really like to follow up on something you just said. You mentioned that people can be surprised that you work in HR, and I, I think for me that comes from a reality where I think a lot of people have a different perception of which what HR is from the reality. So how would you describe the difference between how people might perceive HR and what the reality of HR is?

**Leigh:** I think the perception of HR is like a lot of sort of perceptions that are formed, there comes a use by date I suppose, and people hold onto a perception that is no longer sort of valid or reflective of what the role now is. And I think that's the same for a lot of professions I would imagine.

**Denise:** I found that people often have an interaction with HR and companies when there's an issue or where there's some sort of problem, so they often see HR working to solve issues or working in response to problems, but they don't necessarily get a visible sense of all of the strategic work that's happening that's sort of behind the scenes to make the workplace a great place to work. So you see them responding to negative things, but you don't really see all of the great positive things that they're putting. Is that fair?

**Leigh:** That is a very fair assessment and I think to my earlier point I said I view them as sort of form pushers and the like, so either really dry and just creating unnecessary process, or as you said, you're interacting with HR at a time, you think about it, it's like 'I'm being fired, I'm being performance managed' or a friend or a colleague is being managed because they're underperforming or there's a bullying, harassment claim. Because a lot of the time, that is the interactions that they have with them. But then when I consider even my work today or when I was in a back at HSF, I'd be running a very extensive remuneration or review process where you're trying to ensure fair and equitable outcomes across the business, you're looking at talent and succession planning, you're looking at training and coaching, you're looking at sort of career guidance for sort of more junior team members. We interact on a number of different things and we talk about a number of things like inclusion initiatives, or we're talking about sort of leadership or mentoring. And it's not just you're you know being dragged into HR office because you've done something wrong, but this is what people think of when they think of HR, and there's so much more than that. Like in my current role, as I said our business purpose is to create a future free from climate change inequality and the way that I think about my teams work within that is that how can we work towards that as a business if internally in terms of how we treat our employees or take care of our own, we can't have processes that are lead to inequality or sort of either create or sort of extend existing inequalities. So, we need to consider our policies and all that processes and make sure that they are equitable and diversity inclusion is at the forefront. So, it's like I consider our broader purpose and that's how it sort of informs my work. I'm not sitting there saying who's underperforming, and let's go have performance management conversations. I'm like, how can we remove inequality

## Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript

within our team, which is way more interesting and I think way more powerful outcomes than me sort of being a bit of a pencil pusher

**Denise:** I'd love to ask you a little bit more about how your psychology study is linked to your job. So, you did an Honours in Psych and then you started your career, right? Yeah, so do a lot of people in HR, do that? Do they need an Honours in psych? Do they need a Masters? What's the norm for the kind of study you need to get into the role that you have?

**Leigh:** Yeah, so undergraduate. At a minimum, an undergraduate qualification. I haven't seen, or I can't think of sort of any entry level roles where like a an Honours or Masters would be a sort of a requirement, but it might be as you sort of move up, then sort of a Masters in HR or an MBA or something like that might certainly be viewed favourably, but in order to sort of start out your career and undergraduate qualification put you in great stead.

**Denise:** Leigh, you mentioned that you learned some soft skills when you were studying psychology, and I'm wondering what specifically were some soft skills that you learned that you find helpful as an HR person today.

**Leigh:** Well, how to have difficult conversations. And this is maybe what people think about when they think of HR, but you do talk to people about terminating their employment or their role becoming redundant. And having empathy and being able to support them in that moment. Obviously, the person is still going to be disappointed and upset because it's the nature of the conversation. But if you do it well, they can walk away feeling very differently to if you're in that conversation, you do it really poorly, and so I like to focus on that conversation and how I can do it best in order for them to sort of walk away feeling as best they can in the circumstances.

**Denise:** What specifically would be some of the soft skills that you learned that you've developed overtime that help you in that kind of situation?

**Leigh:** Listening and reflecting back what you're hearing from a person and what's important. Not making assumptions around what you think is important to the individual, so being guided by the person in that moment and what they're saying and really kind of focusing in on... you know you might have a conversation with someone where their role has become redundant and you think what they're gonna be worried about is money, and so we need to go in there with a really good package and need to focus on that and for them what might be most important is sort of how it's communicated to their teams. So it's like actually allowing them to the space in that conversation to talk about what's important to them and then finding a way to ensure that they have as much autonomy around that and the decisions that we make and how we communicate it back to the business, how they communicate it to the team when it's communicated so that they feel like they have some ownership or saying in a process over which the biggest decision has been taken away from them and made for them. So that that would be an instance. And another is that we deal with people who... like we're humans at work. We're still humans and we can have people in crisis. So, we support individuals who are in a situation where there's family and domestic violence at home.... We have individuals who might walk in and into an office, and I've had colleagues just walk in and say I'm thinking about killing myself. And then you have to figure out how to

## Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript

best support them in that moment and ensure their safety. How to best support their team in supporting this individual. I don't want to overstate it and saying it's life and death, but you see people at their lowest and being able to support them and have those conversations and sit there alongside them in a way that feels genuine is incredibly important in those moments. And I think people who are drawn to psychology want to be with people in those moments and support them and a career in HR does actually give you that. And obviously, it's not necessarily a highlight. You don't want people to be in that situation. But, I do enjoy being able to be there for people in that moment and then helping them through that.

**Denise:** Thanks Leigh. What kind of advice would you give to someone who is studying psychology and considering a career in HR?

**Leigh:** I was thinking about the subjects that I studied in psychology, sort of in preparation for this and I was trying to just to figure out like what was most helpful. But if I'm being honest, like the soft skills that you gain from university and sort of that you cultivate during your time, there is what you're really going to carry into your sort of career in HR. Teamed with what I think people are drawn to psychology because they do want to help people and that is very true in HR as well. What I would say if you're starting out in a career in HR is... I just always assumed that psychology was a fairly sort of linear degree in which you do your psych degree, you do Honours, you do your Masters, and then you go practice. And what I would encourage people saying is like don't be so limited in your thinking. Because I was certainly very limited and it took me a long time to realize I guess the opportunities afforded to me by my psych degree and how I could apply it and all the different places I could apply it, so think really broad would be my sort of one piece of advice. Think about what gives you energy, don't just assume you have to go into a counselling role or practise as a psychologist because it can take you a lot of different places. And really, I guess in my case I feel sort of very lucky. I kind of fell into it, but I do love it. It can be really, really rewarding. So, it's like what is it about the psych degree, why were you drawn to it, and how can you find that in other rolls out and some other industries, without being like I need to go get my Clinical Masters and then I can help people and that's the only way I can help people, because I realized it was very short-sighted.

**Denise:** Yeah, I think that's really good advice. I also have heard in our conversation some examples of how you did that. So it sounds like the how for that was accepting jobs that you weren't really sure you wanted trying it out. That's how you fell into it by taking saying yes to an opportunity that came up. You know volunteering or interning at different places and just letting all of those professional experiences build and build so that you understand which different domain or area you might actually get that energy from. Because I think you know when I look back to when I was 20 or whatever and thinking about what I wanted to do, I never would have predicted the jobs that I've done since because I didn't know about them or didn't know that I'd like them and it's only through trying jobs, actually trying it and going into places that you can see, this is bringing me some sort of joy. You don't know that really until you try it. Would you agree with that?

**Leigh:** 100% yeah. I think I say fell into it. You said saying yes to an opportunity which is much kinder way to describe it. But yeah, and even moving within HR into different roles, I often didn't feel ready. My managers had been talking to me and saying you should apply for this role, which is probably a good



## **Leigh Dunlop, Chief People Officer - Transcript**

sign if your manager and the hiring manager are telling you that you should apply for this role. I would listen, but even then, you know I didn't feel ready. But I put my hand up and I'd move into another role and then I'd learn things again. So, I haven't been as perhaps directive or strategic in terms of like what I wanted from my career or what I want from my career going forward. A lot of people have a very sort of distinct plan that they move through and hats off to them. That certainly hasn't been the way that my career has unfolded. It's been fairly organic. What I have done is considered what do I enjoy about this? What did I not enjoy about this role? And use that to sort of shape the opportunities that I say yes to going forward, but always sort of saying yes and ending up in sometimes unexpected places. But that's sort of trying to figure out what is it about this that I really love and get energy from, and then using it to inform the next opportunity.

**Denise:** I think that takes a lot of courage and so yeah, congratulations and I'm happy for you. Sounds like you found something you really love. I also you know you said some people have a set plan. I think those are very few people. I've interviewed and talked to many different people over the years about their careers and what they've done and almost nobody has ever done what they set out to do.

**Leigh:** That is true. It's like, we think that we're supposed to have a plan and where we're told or maybe media or watch movies, and everyone has these plans, but is said that most of us are flying by the seat of our pants and just figuring it out as we go and that's OK. Yeah, that's it.

**Denise:** That's the fun of it, yeah? Yeah alright, well thank you so much for talking with me today. This has been a real pleasure.

**Leigh:** Awesome, that's great. Thanks so much. For having me thanks.