

CAROLINE (00:12)

So hello and welcome to Mind Your P's: the Purposeful Leader's Guide. We believe in all the P's, people, purpose, planet even pizza and prosecco and this week we're speaking to the wonderful Edel Harris who is the chief executive officer of Mencap, a charity known as the leading voice of learning disability. Edel's dedicated her career to purposeful work having previously spent many years as the CEO of health and social care charity Cornerstone and today at the Edel is going to give us some insight into what it means to be a purpose-led leader in one of the biggest charities in the U. K. so welcome Edel thanks so much for joining us.

EDEL 00:49

Thank you it's lovely to be here.

CAROLINE 00:51

Please tell us a little bit about a about your role and Mencap and how it's all going?

EDEL 00:55

I started as CO at Royal Mencap society, which is our Sunday name in January twenty twenty and after eight weeks in what was obviously a new job, but also for me personally you know huge step up into a much larger charity and much more complex organisation and a new life living in London after 8 weeks and Covid struck and we went into lockdown. So I think it has to be one of the most bizarre introductions really in terms of a new role and of course that was doubly challenging because Mencap is one of the largest providers of social care services in our case to adults with a learning disability and some children with a learning disability across England and Wales and Northern Ireland. So not only was a new job as the new CEO in the new organisation we were absolutely at the forefront of managing the pandemic as it spread through society. So just a little bit about Mencap, um we are a learning disability charity as a party as I've said working in England and Wales and Northern Ireland. It's a very significant sized organisation our annual turnover sits at around two hundred twenty million and we employed nine thousand and colleagues and of course like a lot of charities we have fabulous army of volunteers too. And in addition to providing adult social care services we are best known I think as a campaigning and lobbying organisation with and on behalf of people with a learning disability and their families. We also have a number of subsidiaries including our housing association Golden Lane Housing, Mencap Trust Company and we provide a lot of information and advice services, employment programs quite a wide spectrum but a great organisation and in amongst the pandemic and everything else we've had to do this year, we have just about to launch our new big plan and the name that we give to our new strategic plan.

CAROLINE 03:16

Brilliant well that is certainly some introduction to a new role in a huge organisation it's clearly making a difference and I just want to touch on that ,you talked about you know that the kind of changing policy piece. Edel you recently lobbied for vaccines the coronavirus vaccines to happen quicker for your beneficiary group just talk to us about a about that.

EDEL 03:45

Well thankfully it ended up being a very successful campaign in the sense that in both, well in all four countries actually have the U. K. although we can't take any credit for the lobbying that occurred in Scotland, but in all four countries of the U. K. and the decision was taken to include all people with a learning disability in at least priority group six of the vaccine roll out. Covid really shone a light on the inequalities that already exist in our society, already exists in our society for people with a learning disability. And when we saw the shocking statistics in particular the report from public health England that was produced in November last year that showed that people with a learning disability we're up to six times more likely to die from Covid than than non disabled peers and the most shocking statistical of all is if you were between eighteen and thirty four years old and had learning disability when you were up to thirty times more likely to die from Covid. So of course when you're faced with evidence of such importance in such magnitude you cannot ignore it so all the Mencap was very instrumental in and leading the campaign we were ably assisted by many other people and most importantly people with a learning disability themselves and their families and a lot of self-advocacy group so we certainly didn't do this on our own and of course we did have the benefit of our great ambassador Jo Whiley who went through such a traumatic and personal experience with her sister Frances, but was able to cut through I think into the public consciousness in a way that sometimes lobby groups and charities can't do alone. So yes absolutely delighted with that outcome and the role that I played and the role that Mencap played but I really want to give credit to all the others that were involved in making that happen.

CAROLINE 05:48

Yeah it's a fantastic achievement and Edel you know nine nine thousand colleagues nine thousand in the team, how do you treat our people-focused, people first-culture?

EDEL 06:00

Well when I first became the CEO Mencap I have to say I was impressed with what greeted me, literally and metaphorically at the front door my on my first day. So I would say that Mencap has a long and good and proud history and legacy of being a values driven purpose-driven organisation and so from that chat from that perspective I guess I was enhancing something that was already there rather than bringing something new but obviously as I went through the recruitment process to become the CEO, although I was very much being interviewed and tested for the job I was also doing my own homework my

and research into the organisation to check that there was a values fit there and they're absolutely was but some particularly during the Covid pandemic and woven through absolutely implicitly in our new big plan is this emphasis on people first. We are a people business, we want to be genuinely liked by people with a learning disability and we want to continue to listen to their needs and wants to make sure that we're very agile and responsive charity and in order to do that we need to recruit the very best people that we can and when we have people within the Mencap family we want to ensure that their experience working for us or volunteering for us or donating or supporting us in some way is a good experience. *So we don't just let it happen, we put so much and I do personally, so much energy and focus and attention into being kind and genuinely trying to culture all of the people associated with Mencap it's really important.*

CAROLINE 07:56

And you know it's brilliant that people first statement isn't it, but sometimes it's really tough to do. What was going to be the challenges around that, Edel, I mean it's it's a massive undertaking.

EDEL 08:10

Yes I think if I speak from my own perspective and as someone who's in the role of CEO I say obviously it would be almost impossible to ever be in a position where I could personally meet you know all nine thousand my colleagues and that's even if we'd never had the Covid pandemic that's obviously made it even more difficult. But as I said a moment ago I do put a lot of effort into this and into trying to build up a personal and when I say personal I don't mean a non-professional but a personal relationship with with colleagues. So communication's been absolutely critical during the pandemic and I think we should learned, a lot of organisations have, some really kind of imaginative and innovative ways of connecting with people in a way that we didn't before. So I certainly do my best and some practical examples you know, I do a video every fortnight that seems to be well received in and goes out to all our colleagues and volunteers. I'm very conscious that's a one way kind of communication stream, it's me talking at people rather than engaging in conversation. *But I always stress that I am available and anyone can phone me anyone can email me. I've encouraged people through the Covid pandemic to invite me as long as it's not an intrusion, to virtually visit some of our services to join team meetings and I certainly would hate anyone to think that because of the position I hold in some way I'm not reachable, or they're not important, or I'm too busy.* So although I think it gives my colleague Sarah a challenge sometimes I always respond if I'm contacted, because I think building up that relationship is is really important.

CAROLINE 10:14

Brilliant. That's good and Edel, you've had a long career dedicated to supporting and advocating for people who may be overlooked in society and you've been at the helm of some of those, we've just talked about one of them the vaccine significant successes but

what what you learned along the way what's what's the biggest, piece of learning you can share?

EDEL 10:39

My goodness, so so much I think in the context of the question I think having something that drives you, I know lots of people who do lots of amazing and interesting work in so many different sectors and they will have their own you know, personal motivations for being interested or passionate about what they do. And for me any time that I have ever wavered or doubted the purpose of both my role and the organisational role in in whatever context, and I would apply this to the police force in those early days of my career to the work I did in the NHS, as well as the third sector and I think there is a lesson in that. So it is about having a purpose and feeling every day however hard is because they don't want to make it sound, you know, like I have got a halo or something in that working in the charity sector and having this passion to address inequality in some way carries you through, it's very very hard work. You have you have all the same challenges that you have in private business and there's been some very low moments at times during my career, but I think what I've learned is that if you have a really clear purpose and a passion and you know, you have some clarity around around what it is that you're trying to achieve then that can pull you through.

CAROLINE 12:15

Yeah and I'm delighted that you've you've said that you know, that that charities have the same challenges as as businesses and I know you and I have chatted about this this over over the years, this principle of not-for-profits not having the same issues around budgets and all that great stuff. What's what's your thoughts on that now Edel.

EDEL 12:38

Well, far be it from me to tell off the lady that's interviewing me but I hate that term not for profit.

CAROLINE 12:44

I know you do.

EDEL 12:44

Because you know like any organisation, big, small, you you need to to generate and healthy sustainable cash position, certainly have financial stability is one of the measures in which you judge your performance and it's actually a real challenge in in the charity sector because

both the Charity Commission and the other regulators and indeed the general public sometimes times, don't understand that there's a real fine balance between you know what is too much money for charity to be holding in reserves? In order to make sure they have a future and they can continue to do the great work that they do and what is it what is too little to be financially sustainable? So that's always a balancing act and as I say for any sized charity, but more than ever, you know at the moment, I think we've got to again go back to our purpose, why we exist and if we want to be here it's our seventy fifth anniversary this year at Mencap, we want to be here another seventy five years being led by people with a learning disability and responding to what they need and and want us to do, then we need to be in a financially sustainable position the only difference between a charity I think in the private sector businesses in this regard is what we do with that surplus. We wouldn't call it a profit of course but we do need those cash reserves and we do need to be financially sustainable.

CAROLINE 14:29

Absolutely, no I'm I'm I totally agree with you. So listen let's let's just chat a bit about your view your on corporate responsibility or or I suppose the catch all, let's call it corporate responsibility, but but there's lots of different terminology now around ESG and CSR and sustainability and so on what's your thoughts on where it is now? And I suppose initiatives that we that we promote such as employee volunteering and charity partnerships.

EDEL 15:04

It's interesting isn't it because I don't know if it's because of Covid and we've all been massively distracted but I haven't been hearing those those words as often as we we maybe were five or ten years ago. I like to think that's because the concept of corporate social responsibility is is more embedded now with it you know as almost acceptable and required parts of being good or doing good in in business. But we know of course not every organisation necessarily calls it that. But we have seen some great examples haven't we from large corporates and from very small local businesses in the way that they've responded as part of their community to the the pandemic. But I think for me all organisations should think about corporate social responsibility whatever they they want to call it and I would include charges did not because we are employers as well and we operate within their communities too. So I think we need to think carefully about our environmental policies and sorts of businesses that we trade with and we give business to. I think supporting charities in the context of from CSR is not anymore just about doing the right thing, in terms of you know it's good to help charities I think he's got huge huge benefits for the company as well. We're seeing all the evidence to suggest that consumers now are much more keen to engage with a product or service if the company is associated in some way with with a cause, with a good course we're seeing the benefits of having a strong CSR policy in terms of employee engagement particularly among younger people who are being a bit more choosy I think about who they work for and they like to see in corporations who put an emphasis in this area. I think the other really important aspect for us and probably the the often overlooked one is organisations to value employing people with a disability, *if you have a learning disability centre I think the percentage of people with a learning disability in the U.K. your employment is between five and six percent. It's very very low and yet there's a lot of*

evidence to suggest that if you employ someone with a disability, a learning disability in particular they make fantastic loyal, long-serving employees so I'd like people to think of CSR as a little bit broader than just supporting charities in and you know 'doing good' and that she looked in the round

CAROLINE 17:54

Yeah and I love that ,because you know that the the leaders that I've been speaking to particularly in our area are saying gosh you know, we know we need to do more we know we need to do better, we just don't know how. So you know that that is that that balance so you I had a conversation with someone the other day that said I must dust off our CSR policy and actually bring it to life again and I think you know the pandemic has heightened some of some of those senses I suppose, and sensibilities to what's going on around you and your community and that was as employees, colleagues as as customers we're human with all people with working and living in communities that that we can we can work towards making a better place really, so I am so I really like some of that. Edel let let's just stick with this five to six percent that shocked me that figure, what can people do? So we know that our businesses that want to do more they just don't know how would they go by supporting someone with a learning disability in employment, what's the best way to do that?

EDEL 19:05

I think the very first step or very first stage is an education piece actually. Learning disability is not always understood, and we saw that actually during the vaccination campaign that we refer to earlier and the lack of understanding of what learning disability is as opposed to a learning difficulty where those words often used wrongly and that sort of interchangeably. So I think in terms of the workplace and if there is no exposure all ready to people who have a learning disability than an education piece so that employers and colleagues actually understand that of course learning disability you will have certain challenges and obstacles to to overcome, but actually that you also bring huge assets to the workplace. So that would be the this is the first point, and there's lots of organisations Mencap included I mean the people with a learning disability themselves, self advocates who are very happy to you know come staff meetings or do videos to explain what a learning disabilities we would be very happy to help any employer with that. The second point is would be around recruitment, and in the same way we're looking at the broader concept of equity diversity and inclusion at the moment it's a very hot topic. You know it does call for us to challenge our thinking about the way we run our recruitment processes, and think about equity of access to the process particularity if you have a learning disability would require reasonable adjustments. So again there's lots of people and organisations that can help employers with that and then once somebody's in your employment it's treating them the same way you would treat anyone else and have a look at their individual needs because surely if you've given them the job you want to bring their whole self to work, and you want them to flourish and do a brilliant job for you so it's about understanding what that individual might need and it will be individual of course. But what they might need you know just how to do a great job some organisations you know past someone with a disability up with a colleague like a mentor or coach some employment programs have job coaches built in and of course there are lots of apprenticeship programs and employment government funded programs out there. Mencap

runs a number as do other charities, like national autistic society and others so there's lots of information and lots of help and as you just need to make it a priority I guess and and do a little bit of research. But I would love to see society shifts the dial on that percentage, and I hope by the time I leave Mencap and that we can see that that number has risen.

CAROLINE 22:14

Yeah actually actually that's really powerful and I just want to pick up on something you said there about making it a priority. So you know what dot dusting off the CSR policy that nice to have piece, you know what we the stuff that we talk about is this should be at the core right this should be the core of your business is- you know the equity of access in recruitment the equality and diversity, you know looking at your gender balances and qualities and so on so it's easy to say but very hard to do to get that balance that balance right. We're seeing a lot of great post of stuff in the B. Corp movement at the moment which is which is fantastic because that's the real support network around some of this stuff. And Edel we we touched on your your nine thousand colleagues including volunteers, how important are volunteers to you?

EDEL 23:14

Well we have hundreds of volunteers at Mencap and they are an absolute joy you know joy as to to work with, and the volunteering positions or roles within our organisation vary so much. We have a a board of trustees as you would expect who are all volunteers and who give enormous amounts of time and and expertise to the organisation. We have a number of volunteers who are people with a learning disability themselves although really want to stress that we also employ a number of people with a learning disability and as part of our new big plan we're setting ourselves targets to employ even more people and to have people with a learning disability as part of our wider leadership team too I think this is really important. We have a number of people with learning disability volunteer in our offices when they're open in our campaigns team, a lot of our ambassadors if you follow Mencap on social media you'll see some of the wonderful content that they produce I'm speaking for themselves and we have volunteers who work in our retail outlets we have a number of Mencap shops in Wales and England we have more volunteers I think working in our shops and than employed people and we have a number of volunteers who take on fundraising activities for us. Some major annual fundraising events when they're allowed to happen after Covid are organised by volunteers and then within the communities that we serve we have community volunteers be-frienders, activity enablers, people who run mentoring and support people with a learning disability so it's a huge huge range up to and we have corporate volunteers as well so often the corporate partnerships that we form, like the one we had with Virgin Money around the London marathon last year and that is more than people running the marathon although that's pretty welcome of course raising money for us, but it did involve a fair bit of corporate volunteering too.

CAROLINE 25:33

And Edel is such a wide range, you know you you volunteer yourself on top of this huge job that you have, I think were you the former director at Aberdeen Community Trust and your your on Robertson Trust talk to us about but you're volunteering roles.

EDEL 25:52

Yes at the moment currently I just have one volunteer trustee position which is also a board member or trustee at the Robertson trust which is a Scottish grant maker although at the Robertson Trust we're also embarking on the on the implementation of a new strategy where we're broadening out. What we do around poverty, addressing poverty and trauma in Scotland and to be more than simply a grant giver but I have volunteered for for many years in different guises so yes it was a director of the Aberdeen Football Club Community Trust when it was first founded and that combined my passion and love of football with them with community and with charity. I was also volunteer at Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce on their board for ten years and was President for two years and I was a volunteer Clyde sider at the Commonwealth games when they were visiting Glasgow which I absolutely love! So I am I imagine you and that there's a there's a longer list but I won't go on, I just imagine I will always want to volunteer in in some way certainly when I've got more time to give if I just couldn't really keep any other things on when I took on the job Mencap that was such a huge step up for me and needed my time and attention and the move to London obviously change things a little bit. *But I think volunteering is yeah it's wonderful I can only think of good things and benefits I have got as well as benefits I hope I've brought to the causes that I have tried to serve but I think it's a great way to and make new friends, to learn you know a lot of the volunteer board positions I've held over the years have been great personal and professional development for me, I would highly recommend it.*

CAROLINE 27:53

Yeah and it is is is that we talk about the antidote to I suppose a work stress and so on is whole heartedness and doing something for someone without expecting anything in return but when you do it it's almost like you want to I want to bottle this feeling that you get from from volunteering and and sprinkle it over because it does make such a difference and we hear from lots of lots of our employee volunteers about the difference is made for them even if they thought they didn't have time and you know just a half hour a week just lifts them through that week of of whatever they choose to do. So are there any sustainable our purpose-led businesses that you like to support yourself Edel, do you purchase from any anyone specifically because they are purpose-led.

EDEL 28:44

Yes and I when I was CEO Cornerstone, I don't think we called it the CSR policy but the equivalent of one we actually built into our procurement processes that we would always purchase from a social enterprise assuming of course that the quality and the best value because we're spending charity funds was was on an equal footing with any other and private offering or other tender response. So we had some really great partnerships there

and it was always coaching other social enterprises and I would hope we haven't really had to change to have that discussion at Mencap because I feel so strongly about it I'm sure it will come once with through this this Covid pandemic but some of the social enterprises that you know I love, some of a did my heart because I was involved in either that creation or their growth and their development in some stage of my career when I went to Aberdeen Foyer Graphics and a wonderful graphic design company who've done lots of work for me professionally and personally when I got married they did all my wedding invitations and every every every piece of sort of graphics around around the wedding which is lovely, but I've used them a lot in business, Road Wise Driver Training which is one of the social enterprises associated with Aberdeen Foyer my son learned to drive with with them in Stonehaven where I live we have the Trading Corner which is a shop that's run by Cornerstone, it's not a charity shop it is a gift shop and art I try whenever I need a birthday present or a birthday card or doing my Christmas shopping to visit them and of course will most people may be listening to this interview will know the Social Bite who are a great fan of Homes for Good is just another one. I think they're nearly all Scottish so I'll have to add some English social enterprises to that list now I'm living in London. And of course that Mencap we have our own as I mentioned our own retail stores and we're working really hard at the moment to create an online shopping platform so I really hope that people will support Mencap and other charities in that way as consumers because shopping is going to change isn't it forever.

CAROLINE 31:19

Absolutely, absolutely so that's great we'll list some of those just to to to mention some of those resources that's that's really really interesting. Edel you strike me as a calm, kind but passionately tenacious in you know what you want to achieve and and what you want to deliver what what's next for for you Edel?

EDEL 31:44

Gosh I think I've got sort of more than enough on my plate at the moment and say this is still a relatively new job for me although I've been in post now more than twelve months and because lockdown came so soon after my appointment, even though now just beginning to settle in and I have managed to have visits to Wales and Northern Ireland and I of course have met some colleagues in and around the office in London. I I really haven't had that opportunity to just go out and about and engage with and meet and see first hand some of the amazing work that colleagues at Mencap do. So that's going to take help and I think a lot of time once were allowed out again in the summer, and because we have we spent the last year in addition to managing the pandemic to developing a really ambitious and really exciting new strategy for Mencap as I say we call it our Big Plan and officially launches on the first of April and it's a big change for Mencap and we're dropping our strap line the voice of learning disability because we want to be at an organisation that is less leading and doing and the biggest and so on I'm more of a partner, a collaborator and most importantly an organisation that is genuinely liked by people with a learning disability. So we want to create a movement and we're going to be working in very different ways, and are we going to be challenging the way that social care is valued and recognised particularly in England, Wales

and Northern Ireland. So I think with this very bold ambitious new transformation and new strategy I think that it's going to take up all my energy for the next few years.

CAROLINE 33:50

Well it sounds like you've got em you've got some amazing stuff coming up Edel and you're you're a busy busy lady, described for us your perfect day off I know you go between London and Stonehaven, you got your family what would that look like?

EDEL 34:05

My perfect day off which involves swimming I love open air swimming and one of the hardest things to me personally at this sense so selfish when so many people have suffered so much, but one of the things I miss the most is the when swimming pools were closed. So I'm very fortunate that where the flat is in London we have the Hornsey Lido just within walking distance and in Stonehaven of course right at my doorstep I have the most amazing fifty metre saltwater open air swimming pool which is open from May to September every year.

CAROLINE 34:55

So we're not talking about going in the sea are we? We're not talking about running in the sea when it's cold?

EDEL 34:56

No I have done open water swimming in in lochs, I've swum in Loch Lomond and a loch near Stonehaven and near [unintelligible] so I have done that but my preference is open water in a pool I certainly wouldn't be running into the North Sea I can tell you that. I love sea swimming when I'm on holiday of course so yeah perfect day off would be and not necessarily a hot sunny day because I prefer going to the open air Lido's when it's less busy. So selfishly little bit of rain to deter the crowds and maybe only half a dozen in the people in the pool and just spending time swimming and then of course the end of that perfect day would be spending time with my wonderful husband and family who are very dear to me.

CAROLINE 35:52

Well Edel may you have many more of those times and in that pool and we'll do a rain dance to make sure that it's just the perfect conditions for you. Edel thank you fine thanks for everything that you, and you know and and you've got an amazing plan for the future and really appreciate you taking the time to chat to us.

EDEL 36:16

It's lovely to talk to you, thank you.