



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

WHAT WE FOUND: COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR A
SOCIAL PURPOSE

EPISODE TWO

TRANSCRIPT

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication.

David Pembroke:

GovComms is going along for the ride, and we will follow the journey of this multi-year, multi-phase research project, which is called Collective Engagement for Social Purpose.

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

In the interviews, respondents have discussed shared purpose and a sense of social purpose in slightly different but related ways. I think ultimately it's our why. It's your reason for existing and for being. They spoke about things like, "It's our DNA. It's actually our North Star and the things that we're striving to achieve, but ultimately it's something that we all align on and can connect with in some way." So coming back to that idea of relevance and meaning was a common theme that participants discussed when they were talking to us about their social purpose and how that was a shared commitment that the organisation had towards achieving some type of social cause or issue that they were addressing.

Professor Jodie Conduit:

People these days are looking to create more of that purpose. But we do find, David, that this is actually relevant for people of all ages. We're finding that for many people we speak to, often their lived experience informs what they want to contribute and where they want to contribute to. So some people have had that lived experience at the age of 20 and other people don't have it until they're 60, but we do see it across all age groups with people wanting to give back and to help.

Speaker 1:

Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose podcast series, which is a collaboration between the GovComms Institute and the University of Adelaide's Dr. Taylor Wilmott and Professor Jodie Conduit. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. You will remember a couple of months ago, we kicked off the discussion about this fascinating research project with Dr. Wilmott and Professor Conduit where we discussed where the idea for the research project had come from, what problem it was focused on, who's involved, and what the team is hoping to discover.

Now, before we get into episode two, if you didn't listen to episode one, perhaps go back and have a listen. It was published on June the 22nd. Because if you can listen to that, it will certainly help to bring context and understanding and insight into today's discussion. Now, since we last spoke, the team have been super busy analysing qualitative data from interviews with managers, directors, CEOs, founders and consultants who are working across a range of social issues in Australia, including sustainability, youth outreach, domestic violence, homelessness, and public health. In total, 33 interviews were completed, equating to 561 pages of text and over 294,000 words.

So in today's episode, we're going to be zooming in on this notion of shared purpose. And really, it's such a relevant conversation when you consider what is happening around Australian politics at the moment and

certainly the Albanese government, who are framing their efforts through the narrative lens of together, where they're trying to convene a range of collaborative summits to really look to find, how can we bring together people to find that common ground? So really, in this conversation today, it is just so super relevant, and Dr. Wilmott and Professor Conduit will share the key insights from their thematic analysis and to help us to understand, how do you get a group of people to focus on shared purpose? So thank you very much to both Professor Conduit and Dr. Wilmott for joining us for this second episode.

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Thanks for having us, David.

David Pembroke:

So, Professor Conduit, I might start with you, really. Just let's get the basics in place. Let's get these foundations in place about unpacking this notion of shared purpose. How did the project define a shared purpose in the beginning, and how have you started to see the responses of people as they relate to that notion of shared purpose?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

That's a great question, David. Thank you for asking it. When we started out with this, we were looking at some industry reports. So the PwC in partnership with their Centre for Social Impact, they concluded a study that suggested that half a trillion dollars was spent each year on social purposes in Australia, so things like health, education, welfare, housing, the things you mentioned before, which is almost about 32% of our GDP here in Australia. Simultaneously, the Boston Consulting Group found that businesses or organisations that had a high level of social purpose actually had higher margins and higher valuations.

So we were trying to understand and explore really what that meant and found that in academia or in literature, there were very few definitions on what it meant to have a social purpose. One paper we found really talked about social purpose-driven organisations were ones where the people within the group felt that they were making a difference, that it was giving them a real sense of meaning, and it was really drawing their support. So I think those things were quite important. It was really giving a sense of direction to what they were doing. Now, Taylor's been exploring now what our interview respondents say about that, and I think it's quite similar, but maybe giving even some more insight.

David Pembroke:

So, Dr. Wilmott, yeah, if you might give us a bit of a sense of what the respondents have been saying to you.

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah. So in the interviews, respondents have discussed shared purpose and a sense of social purpose in slightly different but related ways. I think ultimately it's our why. It's your reason for existing and for being. They spoke about things like, "It's our DNA. It's actually our North Star and the things that we're striving to achieve, but ultimately it's something that we all align on and can connect with in some way." So coming back to that idea of relevance and meaning was a common theme that participants discussed when they were talking to us about their social purpose and how that was a shared commitment that the organisation had towards achieving some type of social cause or issue that they were addressing.

I'll read you one of the quotes that we have here, and they were talking about it not being something that was transactional and it's more of a "values verdict" and something that they stand by and that lives within the organisation. So they talked about how people will actually come in with varying whys and varying values, but it's very much about coming together as a group and embracing the tension of that in order to align on a common vision and a common goal for achieving a social purpose.

David Pembroke:

I love that description of a values verdict. Can you explain that to me a little bit? What were they trying to say when they used that phrase values verdict?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

I think they were talking about when they're doing the work that they're doing, you always have to have something that's guiding you, a North Star, and they spoke about values being something that they stand for. While you could have your mission statement up on your website that people can find and read, but, actually, values to them is a representation of everyday actions and behaviours, and that is a much deeper level of purpose than, say, agreeing on a set of terms and putting them up on a website for people to view. It's doing rather than telling.

David Pembroke:

So, Professor Conduit, do you find or have you found that it is a priority, this notion of social purpose? Or is it more generally, I suppose, in the people that you've spoken to? Or is it because you have been focused in these social issues that it's not a big surprise that people working in those areas do see this as such a priority and such an importance?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

It's almost their reason for being, David. It's what's attracting them into these areas. For them, this value and this purpose is why they exist as an organisation. It's really what motivates and drives people often to that organisation or to that cause. As I think Taylor mentioned before, there's varying whys and varying values that draw people in, but what really sticks them together and really helps them move forward and gives them that, if you like, that impetus or that energy, is this social purpose in what they do. So, look, it is there, David, in the organisations that we spoke to, but I believe as all humans, we're all striving to contribute to something bigger than ourselves, and we hear that quite a bit from the people that we've been speaking to.

David Pembroke:

Is it fair or is it a cliché almost that younger people these days care more and that they're more likely to be engaged in organisations with a social purpose because of the context that they've grown up in and the lives that they're leading? Is it true that it's more meaningful for younger rather than older organisations and businesses?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

There's definitely, I think, a lot of young people that we've been speaking to. People these days are looking to create more of that purpose. But we do find, David, that this is actually relevant for people of all ages. We're finding that for many people we speak to, often their lived experience informs what they want to contribute and where they want to contribute to. So some people have had that lived experience at the age of 20 and other people don't have it until they're 60, but we do see it across all age groups with people wanting to give back and to help. But definitely, there does seem to be momentum amongst a younger generation to really have that purpose in their working life in particular.

David Pembroke:

So, Dr. Wilmott, if I might put a question to you, how do you go about creating a shared purpose?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah. I think there are a number of different ways that you can go about creating a shared purpose. And that was reflected in the conversations that we had with interview participants, that they would talk about different tools and techniques that they would use in their organisation to develop a shared purpose. But I think ultimately it comes down to those values and setting, I guess, those values from the outset in order for that to guide the work that you're doing. So they did talk about tools like using co-creation and co-design processes to bring diverse groups of people into the room in order to discuss, "Why are we here? What is it that we do? What are the values that guide the work that we're doing?" Some of the key principles that guided those sessions, whether it was co-design or it was stakeholder engagement workshops, were things like collaboration, inclusion, participation, and making sure everyone felt that they had a voice and that voice was being listened to in the room.

One of our participants spoke about a two stage process that they went through. So they conducted a series of co-design workshops and they did bring in a consultancy group that had expert facilitation skills to support that process of developing a shared purpose. But they started with looking at, "What is the problem that we're looking to solve? Do we agree on that problem and why it is a problem?" Then from there they took on an approach of embracing diverse points of view, acknowledging the tension that was in the room for what was quite an emotive topic that they were talking about.

Once they agree on what that problem is, why it's a problem and what their role is in addressing that problem, they then started to become more focused on, "Well, what direction should we move forward in?" And that important stage of that process was agreeing on how best to approach the problem. So we can all agree that the problem is a problem and why it's the problem, but if you don't go to that second phase of that process of establishing what the direction is and agreeing that that's the best course of action, then I think your shared purpose will fall flat as a result of that.

David Pembroke:

So did you get any insights from the interviews that you did about sustaining that shared purpose once it's in place? Because it sounds like there are processes, there are structures that can help you to deliver that common ground, that shared purpose. But as you mentioned before, it could be something that is translated into a mission statement, but then it's not ever used, that people don't go back to it. It becomes a bit of shelfware. So did you get any insights as to how people are trying to keep the shared purpose alive and keeping it relevant?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah, we did. So some of the insights that came through from the interviews was the importance of leadership and in particular cultivating and fostering T-shaped leadership skills, I suppose, where leaders were not... It wasn't top down management. They were talking to lower levels employees and being on the ground. We had one particular interviewee who really described how he was able to be on the coalface of the work that they were doing to not only listen to your customers, which also have to share that purpose as well... It's not only an internal purpose that you're creating. It has to be reflected externally as well, and your customers or your clients have to buy into that. So he talked us through how he had to completely overhaul the internal culture of the organisation, and that did involve unfortunately weeding out some key employees that didn't share that vision, didn't share that culture of listening and bringing everyone into the conversation, including clients.

And so I think from there, he spoke about the importance of things like 360 reviews and having regular check-ins with employees and asking them, "What are our clients telling us? What is the feedback that we are receiving?" and then coming back as a group regularly. So they spoke about not only their fortnightly discussions around the work and the progress that was being achieved in terms of their overarching mission and purpose but also things, as I mentioned, like 360 reviews and being able to evaluate from that perspective, "How are we measuring against our values? And are we living them in our everyday practises?"

That particular interviewee participant was the one that emphasised the importance of our behaviours being a reflection of our values. One of the tactics that he discussed when inevitably you might steer away from some of those core values was actually their online portal that they have. And so if a leader within the organisation notices that a behaviour within the organisation is steering away from that value that reflects the high order purpose of the organisation, referring the employee back into that training module about empathy and connection or having conversations. So there are a number of different ways in which I think you can bring the organisation back onto course and have that shared purpose when you notice that it's steered away or it's not being maintained, as you mentioned.

David Pembroke:

So, Professor Conduit, are there any factors that can help create that sense of sharedness, if that's a word, in this notion of having a shared purpose? What's going to help you to get to the right outcome?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

Yeah. Thanks, David. We found a few things. One is we really need a sense of alignment, and I might just expand on that a little bit, but also we need some real clarity and transparency around what our shared purpose is. Getting people all on board and getting aligned in their understanding with a shared purpose is actually a concept that has challenged us a little bit in understanding it because in our interviews, people talk about the need to have alignment and a shared purpose, but they also talk about the need to have diversity and different opinions and different roles and different people at the table.

So there's almost a dichotomy between needing people on the same page, but actually bringing in people with perhaps slightly different motivations, different points of views, and then moulding those into a really comprehensive understanding and alignment to what the group is working towards. We found that the organisations that have taken their time to do that have a really clear understanding and are able to really clearly communicate what they're about because they've thought it through in detail and in depth, and for that, that's really stood out for us.

David Pembroke:

Well, it's certainly, you go back to those figures that you were quoting earlier, particularly around BCG and performance that comes from really having this powerful, shared purpose. So what makes a good shared purpose in terms of being able to drive that performance? You talk about that diversity, you talk about time, you talk about shaping towards that alignment and that clarity and that transparency where everyone is sort of agreed that, "This is who we are. This is what we stand for. This is what we're trying to do." But what does make a good shared purpose?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

Yeah. As you say, David, I think first and foremost is clarity and transparency. It's about everybody singing to the same hymns sheet, if you like. I have a quote here from one of our interviewees that said, "Everybody knows the story, everyone from the chair of the audit and risk committee to our state government funders, to the people that answer the phones. They know what it is that we focus on. Economic social impact is what we are known for."

So I think having first and foremost that clarity, that transparency, having that clear messaging, but accompanying that I think is the need to have a sense of urgency, a heightened sense of passion and energy and empathy that also come from that. So it's not just the rational cognitive view of, "This is what we're about, and this is what we do," but then a real energy and passion that also sit behind that. Taylor talked before about the need to manage and bring culture forward to celebrate success, to keep imbuing your employees

and the people that you're working with with that sense of passion and urgency around the cause or around the purpose.

David Pembroke:

So, Dr. Wilmott, obviously, you're knee-deep in this 294,000 words. From your point of view, how clear was this sense of the need for urgency, that need for passion, the need for energy, indeed, to be able to generate that successful shared purpose?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah, I think it was hugely important, and I wanted to emphasise as well on top of that is that shared purpose, as you said, David, before, is not something that you do in a half day workshop and then it gets put up on the website and we forget about it. It has to be an ongoing iterative process that you regularly revisit and review. And as Jodie was saying, if you don't get buy-in internally and externally, it's not going to be something that drives or propels an organisation forward towards success, towards tackling and addressing some complex social issues.

So whether that's reflected in company culture or if that's reflected in external reputation that's being developed as a result of the work that you're doing. But as that participant said, their purpose, it's known, it's what they've built their reputation on, and everyone knows the story. I think coming back to that clarity and purpose is really key, and getting everyone to know that, "We stand for this," is a key part of creating a shared purpose.

David Pembroke:

So having had the benefit of the work that you've done so far, and clearly there's a long way to go in terms of this research project, but just to return perhaps to the observation I made in the beginning, in the introduction, around we have the Jobs Summit that's coming up, we've got tech summits coming up, we've got ministers convening these gathering points, which is essentially what they're trying to do is to identify that shared purpose and to get everyone to agree, when clearly there are going to be differences of opinion. So without probably being too specific about what help or guidance you might be able to offer those conversations based on what you know so far, what might be a process that would work to ensure that those collaborations are successful? Professor Conduit, I might put that to you first.

Professor Jodie Conduit:

I think without going through a process, because, obviously, Taylor and I are still working through that, but there are some clear things that we're finding. One is making sure that you've got the right people at the table to begin with and making sure that you've got that real diversity of opinion, not only from people within government or within the organisations but also the people for whom this social purpose is about and enabling those people to also have a voice and believe that they're being heard. I think the other part of that is, as I said, creating that sense of urgency but also creating some safety and trust so that people believe that not only are they going to be heard but their words and actions will be acted upon. So also giving them a sense of agency that there will be something that comes from this, that almost psychological safety and trust is equally important so that they speak up at those events.

And then I think some really clear facilitation for drawing people together. Everyone around the table that comes in is going to have some experience of this, that's why they've been chosen, but all their experiences will be really different. So it's going to take, I guess, strong leadership to... It's almost again a dichotomy. We want the feelings to come from the ground up and the momentum to come from the ground up but some clear leadership to really pull that together to a clear understanding of what we're trying to do. And my last point, I guess, would be, well, two points, actually, to really get a sense of that people can engage with each

other, to also focus on those human connections between the different people in the room, because that will also help to not only create the momentum in the first instance but ensure that it remains ongoing, that it's not left just to one or two people, that everyone feels really connected to each other and to the cause.

David Pembroke:

Very good. I'm scribbling that down. I might send that to somebody I know who's got some involvement. It sounds like a good roadmap. Dr. Wilmott, what would your sort of guidance be?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah. I think Jodie very eloquently summarised what has come through in the interviews in terms of creating a shared purpose, but the only addition I would have is the importance of leadership in that process, and not leadership in the traditional sense of command and control in that setting but more leadership that's authentic and that embraces collaboration and participation of all in that process of coming together to align on a social purpose.

David Pembroke:

But it's interesting, isn't it? Because at the moment, these particular events that we're talking about look to be conceived as a sort of one-off event. We're going to come together, going to have a day. But really what you're both suggesting is that this really needs to be an ongoing conversation and to build that trust over time and to build those connections over time so these difficult conversations can be had, because there is a diversity of view, clearly.

Professor Jodie Conduit:

Definitely. The saying, David, that, "Rome wasn't built in a day," definitely holds here, but we do think to embed that really deep level of engagement around the social purpose, it does need to be something that's continued and almost not even just tapped back into occasionally. It almost needs to have some thread that keeps people connected to it at all times.

David Pembroke:

And for you, Dr. Wilmott, your views on that?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah. I'll share an interesting example that I was reading the other day, and it was actually in regards to the NHS Trust. In 2011, they received some funding around changing organisational culture in the trust at the time, and also this importance of transformational leadership. When I was reading through that article, which I'm happy to share and you can pop in the show notes as well, they went through a framework for how they created a shared purpose within the NHS Trust. They were specifically focusing on nurses and midwives, but ultimately, over the course of many years, it led to a full organisational kind of transformation. But they spoke about that exact thing that we were speaking about, the process of it happening as a cumulative process of developing a shared purpose. I think if we're looking at shared purpose as a means of breaking down barriers and challenging the status quo in terms of culture becoming more collaborative and addressing conflicting agendas in the room that that overarching kind of framework would be really useful in terms of informing the process.

David Pembroke:

Now, NHS, you're talking about, is that the National Health Service in the UK?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yes, yep. That's right.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Okay, great. No, we'll get that, and we'll put that in the show notes, because there's often a lot of very good examples coming out of that part of the world in terms of this notion of communication engagement, building cultures. So, that's very valuable. So lots more work to do for the research project. So where to from here? Where are we heading to now? Professor Conduit, I'd come to you first. I know Dr. Wilmott's got the sherpa work or a lot of the work in terms of diving in and continuing to think about it, but from your point of view, what's next, from your point of view?

Professor Jodie Conduit:

Well, from our point of view, firming up a lot of these ideas, David. We're, as I said, continuing to finalise our analysis. But we've been discussing here, I guess, the initial stages of understanding the emergence of how you get that shared purpose. But, as you said, we want to look more and investigate more how you maintain that over time, how you build momentum around that, and, I guess, how you put in place systems so that we can continue to learn, develop, innovate around these shared purpose aspects. So expanding this out, not just to the evolution stages but the maintenance and evolution of this over time.

David Pembroke:

It's certainly so relevant, isn't it, particularly when consider the changes that are taking place driven largely by technology and then the behaviours that are coming off the back of that, the tech digital transformation, et cetera, that having this sort of ongoing conversation, having this sort of mindset that the job's never done and we're going to move and change and there really is no end point to this that it makes it so relevant that this research will give people a really clear understanding of what is the best way to do that? So for you, Dr. Wilmott, what's next for you?

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Yeah. It would be around establishing and maintaining, understanding how we establish and maintain engagement with a shared purpose, as you mentioned, David, over a longer period of time. And I think looking at systems for learning and development and evaluation within the context of a social purpose will be key moving forward for us in developing some actionable frameworks that practitioners and policy makers can pick up and use and be able to really understand this idea of collective engagement and how you can foster that in a social context as well.

David Pembroke:

I'll be fascinated to see where you land on that, because this is just a personal experience here. At contentgroup, we've a very clear vision, very clear mission and very clear values. Our mission is to help government, strengthen communities, and improve the wellbeing of citizens through effective communication. Our values are to be kind, to be curious, and to be remarkable. Now, trying to keep that relevant as we change and evolve and adapt and all the rest of it, but I'm often challenged by this notion of, are we doing the right thing? Do we need to change? Do we need to change our values? Do we need to think more about our behaviours?

But it's a frame that works well for us as guiding principles, a set of principles and framework. But then I suppose it's the activity that happens inside that as things change that allows us to evolve our culture and the way we work and the way we engage and the way we interact. Because even things like the changing workplace, flexible work. All of a sudden, we're dealing with a really key input into the way an organisation

operates. And then how do you deal with that? How do you take that on inside the wider framework? So if you can sort that out for me, I'd be very grateful and look forward to that.

But listen, fantastic conversation today. Really enjoyed that, and I think there's a really clear pathway. Clearly, the purpose of this podcast series is to engage people in the research project that you're doing, but it's also as we go to help people to learn and to understand and to take the wisdom as you're discovering it. And I think there today, there's a clear pathway and also emerging frameworks that people can use today to really improve that. So thanks again for coming on to our podcast, this Collective podcast series about Collective Engagement for Social Purpose between the GovComms Institute and the University of Adelaide's Dr. Taylor Wilmott and Professor Jodie Conduit. So thank you very much for your participation today, and I look forward to episode three in the weeks ahead.

Professor Jodie Conduit:

Thank you, David.

Dr. Taylor Wilmott:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again. This is fascinating. This is great stuff, isn't it, really? We're working with a couple of Australia's leading researchers in a key and critical and fundamental area of practise and focus. And to be able to take us on the journey of what they're finding out as they go through this process, how lucky are you? Yeah, it's really good. So thank you very much to them. And as I say, we'll keep this going as we go through this series, as we understand a little bit more. Clearly, the next conversation is about, how do we keep these social purposes? Once we've got them defined, how do we keep them alive, relevant, and helping to drive that performance? As Professor Conduit said, the BCG numbers say that if you do this and you do it well, your organisation will perform much better. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks again for coming along. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Outro:

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