

**Intro:** Hello, and welcome to the latest episode of the Aviva podcast. This edition is a leadership special. You're going to hear from Aviva's chief people officer, Danny Harmer. She's been speaking to Sam Gilpin, MD for Europe at YSC Consulting. Among other things, they're going to be discussing the five key factors that can help you lead when everyone is working remotely, and also why good leadership is a lot like teaching someone to swim.

**Danny:** So, Sam, lovely to virtually see you. Covid 19 has been the catalyst for a lot of change and I just thought it would be really helpful for people to understand what you think the impact has been on, and needs to be on, leaders in organisations.

**Sam:** Yes, I mean I think it's such a huge question isn't it, Danny? So, we are going through unprecedented times and as you know I work closely with lots of senior leaders and big organisations around the world, and I don't think anybody is finding this easy. I think everyone is being deeply, deeply challenged. They're being challenged intellectually, trying to figure out what they should be doing. They're being challenged emotionally, which is "How do I deal with all the feelings that this is generating" and I think often their resilience and their physical kind of well-being is being challenged as well. If I take my team in Spain for example, they were locked in their houses. In the UK we could go for a walk, but in Spain you couldn't even leave the house. So I think different people have different kinds of challenges through that.

As I was kind of preparing for our conversation, Danny, I was thinking about some research we did about nine years ago into resilience. So we looked at all the academic research around resilience and we identified five key elements that are really important for leaders. For themselves, and also how they build resilience in others. As we think about that question, and the demands on leaders right now, I think that model is quite a useful frame for us to just to think about.

So, if I if I dive into it, the first thing is about getting real clarity for people about the outcomes they're trying to achieve. So I think that there's something as a leader which is "am I clear myself on what I'm aiming towards?" but there's also something really important here, which is how am I creating conditions for other people to have to be clear on what they are aiming for.

The research around this is kind of interesting. So, one of the things that people think about when they hear resilience, they think about all that determination, that tenacity, that perseverance to keep going in pursuit of something. That is really, really important but the 'watch out' for it is always "are you heading in pursuit of the right thing". Someone who is an absolutely determined kind of bulldozer heading for the wrong thing can be hugely damaging for an organisation and, actually, it's not great for resilience either because you just keep on going after something that's not achievable. So, it's this combination of perseverance and flexibility. Flexibility isn't great without perseverance either because you just go after all over the place. It's getting this combination of the two, it's really, really important.

**Danny:** I'm interested in whether or not you think being physically distant from your teams means the need for that kind of direction is the same, or higher, or lower. You know, when people are working remotely do you think that impacts on it?

**Sam:** Yeah, I mean, I would think so definitely. I like to think about communication, particularly in teams, as being kind of like pipes, and networks of pipes, and when you're working remotely from

people, when you're not seeing them on a day to day basis, it's like the pipes get narrower and also the pipes get blocked. So if you're not clear on the context that people need to be acting in, then the risk is that people are going off, they're taking initiative, but they're heading off in the wrong directions. So in a sense, as a leader, the fundamental question is "is my team pointing in the right direction?" and I think that is much harder when you're dispersed, and you've got to work much harder about setting the context and being really, really clear with people.

**Danny:** Yeah, I think Aviva is definitely a purpose led organisation and I think everyone in Aviva would understand the purpose, but in just listening to you I'm wondering whether they don't always feel they have the next layer down, and therefore "what does that mean for me and my goals, and what should I be striving towards, and how often do I have to check in that that's the right thing?"

**Sam:** Yeah, some observations: one thing I love about Aviva is... I mean I've been working with the organisation for about nine years and there's just this deep sense of care for the customer. A deep sense of why the organisation exists. I think the bit for striving for me for Aviva is, it's one of your values, its kill complexity. It's that thing of bright people who can see a lot of nuance and complexity, can sometimes make things a little bit more complicated than they maybe need to be. And so part of striving for me as well is about "How do I make it really simple what I'm going after?" so as a line manager, am I setting a really clear context for people, am I helping people to visualise the future, and then figure out how to get there? Am I helping people to set and reset goals? Am I giving people good feedback around their progress? Because what I sometimes see in organisations that are quite collaborative, which I think Aviva is, is that people aren't always happy to give people that negative feedback, and say "no, actually you're off track here" or "you should be doing this" because, actually, it can sometimes feel a bit uncomfortable

**Danny:** I think we are sometimes very nice to our people, which, of course... being caring about people is something that matters in the organisation and Care More is one of our values and matters to me personally. It's one of the reasons I joined. I think sometimes we mistake feedback that says "look you're off course" or "there's a misunderstanding, I need you to do it differently" we think that's not about caring whereas, actually, if you really care about somebody and want to support them and are checking in on their performance, you know, "here's some data about how you could do better, now how can I support you?" feels like a really sensible conversation to have, and I think maybe we just need to get our leaders to understand that that's a good thing to do in the interests of your people .

**Sam:** So in a sense, striving is "are people facing in the right direction?" And the next three that we're going to be talking about are all about the right kind of resources that people can draw on. The first one is support, and that's basically that support is a huge kind of mechanism for building people's resilience. There's a kind of myth which is that resilience is a bit like being 'Rambo', which is that you just you go into the forest and you can you hang tough. But, actually, the psychological research about resilience is actually quite different. It suggests that if we've got great relationships to draw on, actually we're much more likely to be resilient. There was a piece of research that I came across which is if you have a really serious life changing event, like a serious illness, then one of the biggest predictors for recovery is actually close relationships. So there's a role for all of us to play which is to think about what are our support networks, and what's practical support – what helps us

to do the task - and what's emotional support, which is what helps us to kind of process the stuff that we're dealing with.

**Danny:** So, in terms of that support, the support isn't as obvious as it was when I could look across the office and see people, and they could see me. I was talking to one of my children about this the other day, about just working from home, and I said "you know, I love my job, I love what I do, I'm really fortunate to have the role I do at Aviva, but it's like in the middle of March someone said to me 'OK, choose a food you love. That's all you're going eat – you eat as much of it as you like, but that's it!'"

**Sam:** I think the thing for us to think about is "what's our own support network?", but as managers and leaders it's to be thoughtful about how we're helping people draw on the support they need. What you'll find is you'll find some people who are really good at practical support but actually struggle with emotional support. Some people who are the other way around. And some people who actually are really bad at asking for help. I see through the assessment and coaching work I do, you often find that high performers have become successful in their life, at school, at University, in their careers, by being really self-reliant, and that they often find it hard to ask for help. So a very simple thing you can do as a line manager is to be just saying to people "where are you getting your support from?" Also, you can be a source of support as well, so it kind of creates an environment where it's safe for people to open up to you and not a situation where everybody has to be kind of strong and self-reliant, because the research suggests that that's not a great route for resilience.

**Danny:** Yeah, I mean, one of the things that we're getting into is the mid-year point and we are asking all of our leaders to check in with their people and have a conversation. We said to everybody that the first thing you need to do is say "How are you?".

Someone in the people leadership team at Aviva was worried about someone in their team, so I said "Just ask, just say 'are you okay? Are you alright?', because you're confused by the behaviour and how it's feeding into the work output. Just, before you wade in with thinking there's a capability or a performance issue, just check that they're OK, and you know I don't need to teach you to suck eggs but just check because it doesn't sound [sensible?]." and they came back to me, and went "Okay, well, they were not okay, and actually I've been able to help them."

**Sam:** Yeah I think this is such an important bit, and we know that some people are more task oriented and some people are more relationship oriented. So if you're listening to the podcast and you go "You know what, I know I'm one of these people who is a bit more task focused" you're not typically going to be going into the "How you doing?" kind of mode. And the risk is... and I remember one [coachee?] of mine, he started trying to do the "how you doing" but he didn't ask it like he meant it. So I got some feedback which was "it's great that he's trying, but actually goes 'so-how-are-you-doing-is-everyone-okay-okay-right-now-we-get-onto-the-task-bit.'" So there's something about... if this isn't an actual strength of yours, just being patient with it and recognising the importance of it, and giving people space to come to you as well.

**Danny:** I think there's something also about knowing that it's okay if you're asked question and you don't know the answer, or how to help somebody. As leaders, of course we don't know the answer

to everything. Nobody expects us to, but I think “I'm here, I'm listening and I want to help” is a really good start.

**Sam:** Yeah, I would just go one further that as well, Danny, which is to say “I don't need to be the person who solves the problem for you”. So I could brainstorm with you who you might go to to get support. Because you're right, I think that sometimes we feel like as a leader we should be competent, we should know what we're doing, we should have all the answers. And I have the great privilege of working with a number of CEOs and, wonderful as they all are, none of them have got it all figured out either. So nobody's got this all figured out, and to put yourself under pressure to think “I need to know all the answers, and I need to be able to solve everyone's problems” isn't very healthy for anyone.

**Danny:** We, leaders, but also our teams – we're all adults - we need to look after ourselves too, right?

**Sam:** Yeah, and I think this goes to the heart of the resilience model, which is a reason why I like it, is that we've got to be thinking about ourselves first, and also how we are helping our teams to be resilient. It's that classic cliché of ‘you've got to put your own oxygen mask on before you put it on the child’ but we've got to be doing both. So, if we think about striving, thinking about ‘Okay, how are we on the goals we're going after? Who do we need to draw on for support?’ Is it a support network outside of work? I mean, someone like you, Danny, who's quite new into Aviva, you haven't got those relationships that go back a long period of time. Whereas some of your colleagues will have that to draw on.

**Danny:** Yes. OK.

**Sam:** Shall we go on to the next one?

**Danny:** Definitely.

**Sam:** OK, so the next one. We talked about striving. Are we heading in the right direction? Then we talked about support, which is stuff we get from other people, and the next one is to talk about confidence. Now confidence is really interesting. So, I think we can all think of situations where, in our lives, where we felt really confident and we've been able to kind of take on things that are unexpected and absolutely smashed them. And probably situations where we felt less confident, where everything's felt really hard and we've kind of backed away from situations, or we step tentatively into situations, and we haven't given our best and then that's made us feel even worse about ourselves. So it's this really subtle thing, confidence, but it's such an important emotional resource. Actually, if we can nurture it in ourselves and other people, it can have a huge difference in performance. And I think the thing that I find interesting about confidence is that it's not static - it doesn't stay fixed. It's like a circle. What we do is... when we go outside of our comfort zone, and we do it successfully, we build our confidence. We go “okay, I can do more than I thought I could do.” And if we stay within our comfort zone and don't do anything, our confidence is likely to kind of stay flat, or over time start to recede. But the kicker is that if we try and do something that's way outside of our comfort zone and find we can't do it, then our confidence tends to drop. So, as a line manager, it's often about “okay, where are my team on their confidence? What can I do that's going to nudge them out of their comfort zone enough to give them that confidence boost, but not so far

it's going to potentially be unhelpful?" And I can think, as a parent - and I won't speak for you Danny - but definitely occasions when I've got that wrong, when I tried to push my kids too far, and actually then it's kind of caused them to retract further. So it's quite a subtle one, confidence, I think.

**Danny:** Yeah. I always tried, when I talk to people about this, I go "just think about if you were teaching someone to swim." You wouldn't shove them in the pool and walk off, right? You would get in the pool with them, and then you would maybe sit on the side and give them an inflatable ring or a kick board, and then you would probably... you know, once they can, you stay on the side but they don't need you. I think it's the same with helping people in your team to start to pick things up. Because, you know, standing on the sidelines saying "You can do it" while someone drowns is not... it's not just about my belief in you, there has to be some skill and capability that sits underneath that to build the confidence.

**Sam:** I think that's really nice, Danny, and it makes me think about... I'm sure you remember the situational leadership model, which is basically about how 'task related' versus 'relationship related' you are, and I think it's a really nice analogy for that. Kind of... you're in the pool with them, showing them how to do it, you may be still in the water but kind of watching, cheering them on, and stepping in when they don't get it right, then you're kind of sitting on the side, and then you're actually letting them swim... so I think it's a really nice way of thinking about it.

I think other practical things that you can do is... I think with people who are a little bit underconfident, getting tapped into their purpose can be really helpful. Because it can sometimes be the difference between taking that step into the unknown and not. I remember I was mentoring one of my colleagues years ago and she was she was really struggling with her confidence, and we helped her think about what really mattered to her. And she was worried about looking a fool and getting things wrong and then she thought, "well, actually I care about this thing so much that it doesn't actually matter if I get it wrong. I'm just going to go for anyway and do my best." and I think that can be quite helpful as well.

**Danny:** Yeah, I think the other thing people have talked to me about on a number of occasions - because I have yet to meet anybody who actually says "do you know, what I love doing more than anything else is standing up in front of a large group of people and presenting" the anxiety and the adrenaline hits them differently, you can learn it, you do it well and it increases your confidence. There's something as well I think about, if you try and focus on what you can give to this thing, rather than what you're going to get from it, i.e., how everyone's going to be looking at you... you know, and it comes back to what you said, "I'm so passionate about this and I want to help this situation or get better or make a difference" that it can help you to switch around and think about "right, what can I give to this situation". Rather than thinking about everyone's going to look at me and think I don't know what I'm talking about.

**Sam:** The other practical thing that I think can be quite helpful here is that there's a lot of line managers and leaders that I work with who are so focused, they've got such high standards, they are so ambitious for what can be achieved, that they find it hard to stop and pause and celebrate success. And so there is something about actually calling out achievements in your team, celebrating their strengths, and those things can be really confidence building as well. I think the other bit is just to be thinking about "what's the environment I'm creating around me?", so am I creating an environment where people feel confident, or I might feel I'm creating an environment people are

worried to make mistakes, and often that's the role you're playing as leader in terms of how you're responding when people get things wrong. That can be a key element for confidence too I think.

Okay so we've talked about interpersonal support and emotional support, and the final one is physical support, and that's what we call recovery. So recovery is what people typically think of when they think about resilience, and it is really important. It's things like the Wellness agenda. It's things like eating healthily. It's mindfulness, it's getting enough sleep... all those things are really, really important, but actually just doing them on their own isn't enough. I think the bit about recovery that's interesting is that... I think we all know now what we're meant to do, what we're not meant to do. I'd be very surprised if anyone listening to this podcast really thinks "to be effective at work, I know to stay up late, not get enough sleep, drink too much alcohol, not take exercise..." I mean, I think I think we all know it now. I think what's interesting is how do we help ourselves and help other people have good habits. Research suggests that if you can embed things as habits then they are much more likely to stick. So, there's something here about "am I really talking to my team about their own recovery strategies, their own energy management?" so I think that's really, really important. But the second thing that's really important here for me is about how am I role-modelling it, because I might be saying... because I'm actually a bit guilty of this, Danny... so I might be saying to people that it's really important that you take holiday, but then people are going to see that I'm not taking holiday. And then people go... and this actually is true, I kind of ditched two weeks of holiday so this is genuinely true (and I had good excuses for doing that just to be really clear!) ...

**Danny:** I'm sure you did...!

**Sam:** ... but actually, if you're saying to your team "don't check your email over the weekend" and then you're sending emails at two o'clock on Saturday morning, seven o'clock on Saturday morning, 2 AM Sunday morning, they're going to be going "Well, not only am I feeling frazzled about 'Sam said don't check your emails', but he's sending me all these emails over the weekend, so I feel I ought to respond" but they're also going to be going "Well, Sam's saying this stuff but what he's actually doing is different" and one of the things we know is that followers tend to judge what their leaders do as much more important than what leaders say. So, I think it's helping people on their energy management and having healthy habits, but it's also role modelling it, walking the talk, all of that kind of good stuff.

**Danny:** I think there are small things that we can do as well. So, I had people leadership team meetings... we've made meetings shorter while we're on technology, because I think it is harder to concentrate and you don't get some of the natural breaks you would in a meeting. But we had a meeting that was scheduled from 11:30 until maybe 2pm or something. I just said to my team that we need to rejig this agenda and put a half hour break in the middle because I need to eat, everybody else on the call needs to eat, there are people in different time zones... but, largely, that's too long to be on a phone, on a device, from the concentration perspective. I'm worried that people are not getting breaks as well. And I think I've had more positive feedback about putting a break into that meeting than any other thing that we've ever done from a people leadership team perspective! Because I think people thought "Hang on, you do understand and you are thinking about us", and we stopped the call and everybody went and the sun was shining that day, and I hope they got some fresh air and food, or just went and spoke with their family or whatever it is they wanted to do.

**Sam:** I do find staring at screens really tiring, just personally. And I know having spoken to a number of people, colleagues, but also clients and other organisations, that there's an energy requirement of being present virtually that's very different from being in the room with people. I mean, one of the things that I've taken to doing with my team is to go back to phone calls some of the time. And actually, now that we can leave the house more than once a day in the UK, is to do a call on a walk so you actually get a bit of exercise as well and I think just encouraging people to experiment to make it OK to do this is really important.

I think the other bit about recovery that, from a leadership perspective, is important is about “how am I creating structure that works for the people who work for me“. One of the things we know is some people are much more contentious and planned some people get a lot of energy from doing things last minute, but as a leader if you're someone who's really last minute and you've got lots of planners around you, they're going to be absolutely driven mad, and they're going to find it exhausting being with somebody who is throwing everything up in the air five minutes before it's due. Or make people work to four in the morning because you've been planning something for two months and then, two days beforehand, you change what you want. I think there's also something here, again, thinking about yourself as a leader “What am I doing to help my team recover?” and to play into their different characteristics as well.

Should I go on to the last one?

**Danny:** Yes

**Sam:** And actually, do you know what, just before I get onto this, we've been running some workshops around 'leading through crisis', and we've run them with leaders all around the world, and what we've been finding leaders are struggling with most at the moment is the recovery - the one we just talked about - and the adaptation we're going to talk about next. I think the recovery is because our normal habits aren't working, and actually we've probably developed some unhealthy habits while we've been on lockdown. I know I have. So it's about how we reinstitute some healthy habits. For adapting, though, adapting is basically taking the space to step back and to figure out what we need to learn, how we need to change, and I think what's really hard is that when we're being bombarded with new stuff every day, new demands, we get into the kind of fight/flight/freeze response, and it's very hard to create that space to think differently. So we get caught in this very reactive mindset.

Adapting is partly past focused, so 'what do I need to learn?', but also future focused, so it's kind of 'how is the world changing, and therefore how do I need to adapt?'

I think there's a thing for line managers here, which is about how do you create space for the team to step back, but it's also how do you create space for individuals to stop and pause and think about their development. So a classic thing, again if you're thinking about line management conversations, where are your individuals with their development? Like what are they focused on, do they have a development plan? Is it real development plan, or is it a kind of tick box exercise? What are the two or three things they are working on, and how can you help them take that step, take that space to think about “Let's not worry about everything going on right now, let's just talk about you, what you're learning, and how you need to change going forward.” That's kind of this one.

**Danny:** In terms of having a midyear conversation with somebody and you want to check in on them from a support perspective, we've talked about recovery and self-care, something around what they're striving for, being flexible, and then the adaptability... do you think everything is of equal importance? How would you structure it? Where would you start?

**Sam:** I think that the flow we talked through today is quite a nice flow, actually. How're you doing towards your goals, how's the context changed, are they the right goals... how're you doing in terms of your persistence around them, have you had to change direction, do we need to re-evaluate them... let's start there. Then go into how are you doing in terms of the resources you're drawing on, what support have you got, how confident are you feeling and how're you looking after yourself? And then at the end you can have a broader conversation about what have you learned over the course of the last six months, what have you learned about yourself, what have you learnt about the business, what have you learned about your customers... and, actually, what's lovely is that then takes you back into striving, because actually having had this great conversation it might be "do you know, what I figured out is that actually I need to be focused somewhere else and therefore I need to rethink the support I need" so I like to think of it as an ongoing kind of circular conversation if that makes sense, Danny

**Danny:** Yes, that makes perfect sense. I think the other challenge that Covid and lockdown is giving leaders, in the context of the conversation we're having (there are other challenges as well obviously) is this sort of sense that in some roles they go "How do I know what different people have delivered, because some are home schooling and balancing educating with childcare or caring for elderly parents", I'd be interested in your perspective because mine has always been to assume positive intent, we're adults talking to each other. You know, do what you can and tell me how you got on with it. Give the individual that responsibility and accountability.

**Sam:** Yes, I would really agree with that. I think what becomes really difficult is when it goes from being "I've done my best and I'm delivering just about enough" to, actually, you've got you've got a colleague maybe who is so distracted, and so involved all the other things in their life, which is... are they actually doing the job they are being paid for. And I think that's a really hard call for any manager to make. Particularly during a period like this. But I think there's also a question of fairness, which is if other people are working twice as hard because someone isn't pulling their share of the weight, that doesn't feel great either. So I think there's an adult bit here in terms of positive intent, but I also think there's a tougher thing to grapple with for organisations in here as well.

**Danny:** Yes, it's a thorny issue. I'm proud to say at Aviva our position was while we're on lockdown, we're supporting people and assuming they'll do what they can, but we understand that if they've got children to care for or educate, or elderly parents to look after or whatever it is, that we'll support them and then, as we gradually phase back into a new normal, that we know they'll give back and contribute in the way that they can.

That's great! So, I think it'd be good if we just run through the five points for people as something to have in their mind as a framework

**Sam:** Yeah, so, I've got a kind of question for people to ask themselves as well, particularly as they are preparing for a mid-year conversation.

So if we start with 'striving', the question to ask yourself is "Is my team, as individuals and a team, are they pointing in the right direction?" Support, "Do my team know where to go to for help?" Confidence, "Do my team believe in themselves?"

**Danny:** Rubber ring at the ready!

**Sam:** Indeed, or the float! Recovery, "Are my team looking after themselves?", and 'adapt' "Are my team developing and growing?"

**Danny:** Sam, that was fantastic. Thank you so much for your time.

**Sam:** It was a real pleasure. I really enjoyed talking to you about it, Danny.

**Danny:** Lovely to see you. Thanks a lot. Bye!