

This short article, published in PropelHer, Grounded Curiosity, encapsulates my thinking, experiences and research about leadership and teamwork.



## High Performance Teams and Leadership Lessons – Afghanistan Evacuation Task

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<https://groundedcuriosity.com/high-performance-teams-and-leadership-lessons-afghan-evacuation-task/#.Yu9uLnZBy5f>

For nine months (August 2021 – May 2022), I have been part of a volunteer team, including Chris Parsons and Martin Dransfield, evacuating people who worked alongside New Zealand agencies, such as the NZDF, from Afghanistan. This has been the most challenging, emotionally draining and complex task I have ever been involved in, and the likelihood of succeeding in this task was exceptionally low. I personally have dedicated an average of 30 – 40 hours per week to this, for nine months straight, and my teammates would have done similar. Our team has collaborated with the NZ Government taskforce, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) to overcome barrier after barrier to make this happen. We have been in the media to pressure the government and to win public support, have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from generous New Zealanders to fund the evacuation costs, used our various networks to complete detailed documentation for each of the Afghan families, and managed the logistical requirements for border crossings.

This international evacuation from a Taliban controlled country with no NZ presence on the ground, has occurred in the middle of a global pandemic, with families on the other side of the world, who mostly do not speak English and have limited access to internet. As well as being complex, frustrating and time-consuming, the emotional toll of feeling responsible for the safety of the families we were helping was substantial. We are proud that we have now supported the evacuation of every person our team obtained visas for: 563 people. In July 2022, we had the overwhelming joy of meeting with hundreds of the people we helped in Auckland. Here is a video of this reunion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxb02PhX0rM>



Upon reflection, this Afghanistan evacuation task is a stunning example of everything I believe about leadership and high performing teams.

### **1. You don't need a title to be a leader**

While my teammates considered me the 'heart' or the 'glue' of our team, there was no formal leader, and no hierarchy. We each took the lead in the areas we had the skills, networks and expertise. For example, we would follow Alex's lead when it came to the operational movements on the ground. As I gained confidence during this journey, I took the lead when it came to media interviews, and we all played a leadership role with the tasks relating to the various connections we each had. No one assigned us these roles, but we seemed to know when it was our place to follow, and when it was our place to lead.

### **2. Authenticity – the best version of you is you**

My PhD research, and my own experiences of leadership in the NZ Army and beyond, has led me to believe that there is not one set way to be a leader. The best leader anyone can be is the leader that is true to themselves. While I have always considered myself to be authentic, I do not think I have ever been so 'real' during a task before. My team have seen me in tears, they have read and listened to my vents and rants, as well as my vulnerabilities and insecurities, and they have accepted my full-on personality, packed with feelings, passion and affection. I emotionally absorbed the sorrows and fears of the Afghan families, and this was an overwhelming weight on my shoulders. If I had not felt comfortable to be so authentic and let my emotions out every time we had a worrying setback, I would have exploded. For me to contribute positively to my team, and to this task, I needed to bring my A-Game. And bringing my A-Game meant I needed to bring the 'full Ellen', warts and all. It is my belief that Chris, Martin and Alex brought their full selves to this task also – we all saw each other's ups and downs, and this meant we could also bring the very best of ourselves.

### **3. Diverse perspectives, coupled with inclusion**

Our team all have military backgrounds, but aside from that, we are actually quite diverse. We span three generations: Baby Boomer, Gen X and two of us in Gen Y. We have diversity of gender, ethnicity and nationality in the team. And more relevant, we are very diverse in the way we think and our personalities. We would have robust conversations about the best way to approach each barrier we came up against. We needed our diverse range of talents, perspectives, experiences, connections, and approaches. This was a complex task, with a range of stakeholders. Diversity was not a 'nice to have' but was essential for success.

Further, diversity on its own means nothing if there is not also inclusion. We held each other in such high regard and valued and respected each other's views. This meant that we all felt confident to bring our diverse ideas, and our authentic selves, to the team. It also meant we became incredibly loyal and protective, genuinely caring for each other. I remember at some point in the journey, when I was doing some particularly unenjoyable task, at some uncivilised hour, that not only was I doing this for the Afghan families, but I was also doing it for Chris, Martin and Alex. I did not want to let them down.



#### **4. The Power of Purpose**

This one is pretty simple. We each believed that evacuating these people to safety was the right thing to do. We were all volunteers, and we made significant sacrifices: to our time, our mental health, our 'actual work' and our sleep. When people have a clear purpose, and when they believe that what they are doing has meaning, they will be relentless in achieving that purpose.

#### **5. Ditch the 9 - 5**

My post-doctoral research focused on the challenging experiences of working parents, and I am now pushing a movement called #workschoolhours which is both socially smart, and importantly, it is also commercially smart. The concept focuses on outputs (as opposed to inputs, hours worked) and on flexibility. This Afghan evacuation task was measured only by the outputs we agreed to each other that we would do. There were no set hours, we completed our tasks in and around our life. For me, that usually meant working on this when my kids were in bed, through to 2 or 3am.

It further demonstrates what can be achieved via remote working. I did not know any of these men prior to this task and the four of us have never been in the same room together. During these nine months, I have seen Chris and Martin only three times each in person and I have never met Alex; our communication has been via phone, zoom, messages and email. I don't accept the argument that people need to be in an office, during set hours, to achieve mission success, and to bond as a team.

#### **6. The Power of Collaboration**

Another finding from my PhD research was the value of leaders who adopt a collaborative approach. As well as collaborating with each other, our team collaborated with many other people who supported this task. My Afghan interpreter friends were instrumental to this task, as were the connections that Martin, Alex and Chris had. Our collaboration with the media, with generous donors, and with other advocates beyond our team, was vital for the success of this task. And the biggest partner was the NZ government taskforce, led by MFAT, including several other government agencies. We worked alongside some incredible government officials. The task would not have been possible without this collaboration between the NZ government and volunteer advocates.

#### **7. Caring is Under-rated**

During my time in the Army, I was often told that I cared too much. My PhD research revealed that many other women in the Army experienced the same criticism. I don't think the term 'care' can be used strongly enough in this situation. Our team cared so deeply about these families, and about New Zealand meeting its moral obligation. If any of us had cared just a little bit less, we would have walked away from this, and perhaps the outcome for these families would have been different.

#### **8. The Power of Fun**

This task was not fun. I did not enjoy doing administration and tedious documentation in the middle of the night. I did not enjoy tracking the financial reconciliations. While I cared so much for the safety of the Afghan families, for the most part, liaising with them was hard – it was extraordinarily draining, heart-breaking and bad for my mental health. I felt a huge amount of anxiety and pressure to 'get it



right' with the media interviews – to not say anything that could put the families at risk, to provide enough pressure to the government, but not to get them off-side and to resonate with the NZ public. Working through the barriers with the MFAT taskforce was often very challenging. I lost a lot during these nine months. I lost weight due to the stress. I suffered a miscarriage. I lost sleep and I wasn't always mentally present for my family. I struggled, and am still struggling, with anxiety and the traumatic experiences from this task. I have cried more than I can ever remember, and I also lost my sense of innocence, thinking that the Government would always be capable.

Yet beyond this loss, I am still supremely grateful to have been involved in this task. The obvious joy was each time a family was evacuated across the border. But my regular joy came from interacting with my team. Chris, Martin and Alex each taught me so much – the education gained during this journey has been invaluable. This was a very serious and important task, with very high stakes. Yet we had so much fun together. We bonded so tightly and generated a magical team chemistry. We shared so many laughs, would make fun of each other, share goofy memes, tell jokes and stories. I even made some comic sketch videos and a ridiculous rap video in an attempt to make the guys smile. Beyond the loss, I gained three incredible friends for life. Fun is what sustains people.

### **9. Never Underestimate Someone with a Baby**

My PhD and post-doctoral research found that many organisations consider parental leave periods as 'time out' from work, that 'doesn't count' towards career progression. I believe that instead, we should appreciate the skills people gain by having children: empathy, time management, selflessness, patience, negotiation, resilience and so much more – all attributes that are of great value in the workplace. Since having children, I have had several experiences of 'professional invisibility' when accompanied by my baby(s). As if I was invisible to a 'work' conversation because I was 'just' a Mum. Alex started this task with a newborn, and Martin's family welcomed a new grandchild during this task. I did several TV interviews, team meetings and MFAT meetings, while breastfeeding my baby, and while juggling my four-year-old. Do not ever underestimate the capability of a parent with a young child.

### **Summary**

It turns out that this task has been the most stunning case study example of so many of the things I believe about high performance teams and about leadership. The four of us each have a dedicated work ethic and are accomplished and capable in our own right. But we could never have achieved this as individuals. Being a team, and specifically being a high performing team, with high morale, was essential for this complex and challenging task. This experience has reinforced my research, experience and thinking around leadership, teamwork, and performance. Everyone can both lead and follow and authenticity is paramount to getting the best out of people. Diverse perspectives, which are valued, are essential for succeeding in complex tasks. People with a purpose can overcome so many obstacles and set work hours, with colocation does not determine mission success and team culture. Collaboration and care deliver results and fun is an essential ingredient to sustaining people during challenging situations. Finally, do not misjudge the abilities of parents.





Chris, Ellen & Martin, plus Nowroz (interpreter)



Martin, Ellen & Chris



Ellen with two girls we helped evacuate



Some of the children we helped evacuate

### Ellen's Bio:

Dr Ellen Joan Nelson is an ex-army academic business mum, with deep expertise and practical experience in leadership, well-being and the future of work. Ellen has spoken at TEDx Auckland in 2022, advised many corporate and government organisations, including the NZ Army, and her research and ideas to improve the working world have been published multiple times. As a speaker, facilitator, coach and consultant, Ellen helps organisations to remove structural barriers facing women and parents, while simultaneously experiencing improvements in organisational metrics such as: wellbeing, retention, leadership, productivity, innovation and business performance. Her volunteer team evacuated 563 people from Afghanistan to New Zealand and she started the #workschoolhours movement. [www.ellenjoannelson.com](http://www.ellenjoannelson.com)

