

Leaders with impact podcast

(E4) Sheron Carter, Chief Executive Hexagon Housing Association

[00:00:00] **Lee:** Today's guest sees herself as custodian of her organisation. As CEO, she knows she needs to bring ideas and vision about what she wants to achieve in her role, but underpinning it all is listening to the people around her, helping them to achieve their unrealized ambitions.

[00:00:18] I'm Lee Griffith, a communication strategist, executive coach, and all around champion of leaders who shun the old school stereotypes. I'm here to help you get clear on your strategy, implement some self-leadership and connect with those you serve through your communications so that you can deliver improved organizational performance, engagement, and reputation. Visit sundayskies.com to subscribe to my newsletter and get notified when new episodes are released every fortnight.

[00:00:45] In this episode, I was delighted to talk with Sheron Carter, chief executive of hexagon housing association. Sheron has worked in social housing and the charity sector for almost 40 years and has led several organizations. She's faced challenges, had to tackle discrimination in her career and has been the change maker. And I think what stood out to me in our conversation is that she absolutely does this in her own way, in her own style. Enjoy.

[00:01:09] I'm delighted to welcome Sharen Carter to the Leaders With Impact Podcast. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me today.

[00:01:16] **Sheron:** Oh, you're welcome.

[00:01:17] **Lee:** First question that I ask everybody that comes on this podcast is to tell me what impactful leadership looks like to you.

[00:01:26] **Sheron:** Oh, that's a really good question. I think for me, impactful leadership is about making a difference, but doing it in a way that gains the support, not only of the people who you need to work with to make that change, but also the people that change is going to impact. There is something about people believing that the thing you want to do is the, is a good, right, profitable whatever people's motivations are, but it's a desirable thing to do and that there is a confidence, in your end goal, the plan that you have to deliver that end goal, and that trust and confidence of people around you that you're approaching it in an r ight and acceptable way. I think that's how I would describe it.

[00:02:13] **Lee:** I like that and you've used a few words there that really resonate with me, and I think we'll probably pick on some of these as themes later as we talk. Can I take you back a little bit because I like to explore what's happened in a leader's life that's perhaps shaped the person that they are today.

[00:02:31] So what's your story?

[00:02:33] **Sheron:** Well, I started in, in housing, in, oh gosh, it's quite a long time ago, 1984. One of the things that encouraged me in that direction is that I myself had some housing difficulties and, I needed to call on some help until I, I got myself better established.

[00:02:50] But during that time, it just raised my awareness of how difficult the housing situation was, when you do have housing difficulties, and also the way that people treat you when you're a customer in those situations, and a thought that just stayed with me, is, having to meet with somebody over a particular problem, and really being treated as though I was disregarded and I didn't matter. And it put that fire in my belly from that day, and I remember it, I always tell this story, it's quite funny that, I remember saying to this person, youknow, that, youknow, all that you guys are good for is to, sit in your offices and drink tea all day.

[00:03:28] and it's just interesting that I now drink surprisingly lots amounts of tea, so the table has turned a bit. But it started off really being, not being happy with the way that I felt when I was in that situation and feeling that I could, I could do better. So I always had this desire to go into, a profession which was about helping people, caring for people and I, I thought for all of five minutes that I would be interested in going into the fields of social work.

[00:03:58] I went on the course to kind of, learn a bit more about social work before taking on the qualification. And it taught me that that wasn't quite where I wanted to be. it's quite challenging when you're having to make those really difficult decisions on other people's lives, but I wanted something that was associated with it. So I sort of segued into housing through that thought process, I, I found a job in an advice centre, and when I took the job at the advice centre, it was thinking that social work would be the next step. and in the advice centre, it was about housing advice, it was dealing with homeless people. I remember when I won my first case, we went to appeal and I won my first case, and, it really put that fire in my belly that this is, this is what I... wanted to do and I sort of stepped into the housing management side of it and thereafter and I've built my career from there.

[00:04:53] So I guess from that very early stage of believing when you're young that you can change the world, which is what you need to kind of get you going. believing that I could make the difference and I could change the world is what got me into, working within housing. And that part of my character hasn't really changed, even when I came in housing, when there was opportunities to step up into more senior roles and to have more influence.

[00:05:20] Fortunately, I work in a, in a sector where people support you with your further education, your training, that they will develop you. so I had opportunities to go back to university to study housing, to sit on various boards and get involved with various projects. and that at each stage of my career, just put me in touch with people who were doing other interesting things and opportunities came my way really from, having a healthy curiosity, having a fire in my belly and, and being, ready and willing to get involved and that blossomed into to other opportunities.

[00:05:59] **Lee:** So how do you think those early stages when you were, I suppose, on the receiving end of what you are now providing as a service and that first started to ignite, that spark as you say. How do you think that's influenced how you're leading now?

[00:06:14] **Sheron:** It influences how I want to see us deliver services. and one of the things that I kind of need to be honest about is as time goes on and you understand the pressures more, and as, as you go through your career, you do make compromises as you understand those pressures more. So I can't say that we don't have customers that will also come in here and think, all you people do is sit down and drink tea, you know. But the message that I give to, to my teams all the time is, we have to remember it is our customers that pay for our lives, that pay for our holidays, they're the ones that we need to be serving and we need to be putting their needs first.

[00:06:53] We may not be able to do everything that our customers would like us to do, but we should always be very honest and clear about what we can do and what we can't do. And if there is something that we can't do, to look at other ways that we can support them by directing people to other services. And fortunately, we've got a really good community investment team here at Hexagon, where if people are, suffering financially, particularly in the current climate, there's a network of services that they can refer those customers on to so that they can get support if, if there's something that we can't do.

[00:07:30] **Lee:** I'm really interested in your use of language because you refer to, the people that you support as Customers and I suppose when I was

preparing for the interview, I automatically started to think residents as a word. Is that something that you've been very conscious of in how you refer to the people that you serve?

[00:07:47] Hmm.

[00:07:47] **Sheron:** we use the language interchangeably, if the truth be known. I do know that, that, we do have some people who are very strong and they want to be re referred to as a tenant, or they want to be referred to as a leaseholder because that's how the legal relationship is established, between the two parties.

[00:08:06] But there is something about using the language of a customer that people can relate to. So within the business, when we're talking about the culture that we want to create, when we've had some workshops, when we were delivering our cultural values, we really got people to think about, themselves as customers and when they have engaged with various services and retail sector, et cetera, and when they've had good experiences and when they've had bad experiences and what that looks and feels like. And to remember that in many ways, we're all customers of some sort of service and we need to remember that when we are serving others, that there is a way that you can deliver that service and you have to take into consideration how you can make a person feel, even in some of the most difficult situations.

[00:09:00] and we don't always get that right, but there is an ethos around. putting the customer first in terms of our cultural values. we've used the acronym CARE. And the C stands for customers at the heart. And it is about, in the way that we communicate, in the way that we deal with our customers, we need to understand that we're working in a business which is about them, and it is about their housing need, and how we can address that housing need.

[00:09:28] **Lee:** With regards to your customers, your tenants, residents, what do you see your role being?

[00:09:37] **Sheron:** I see my role as establishing a strategy for the organization and ensuring that we have the allocations of budgets and the planning and delivery of services that ensures that our customers have a decent home and receive decent services from us. And I need to do that with my team, of course, in a number of ways.

[00:10:03] But it's making sure that we've got the right plan. It's making sure that we're focusing on the right things. It's making sure that we've got the right tools within the organization to deliver.

[00:10:14] One of the elements of our corporate plan it's really about modernizing. Hexagon's a great organization. It's been working within South East London for a number of years. And, well recognized within the community. But pre COVID, when everybody was in the office, a lot of our systems were a bit old fashioned now. people were together, they could converse, it was a very kind of oral tradition that we had here, and what we found during COVID when, very, very quickly, we all had to be agile, is that some of our systems and processes, I'll be honest about that, some of our systems and processes, were, were not, well, the weaknesses within them were revealed during that period. So, coming out of lockdown and re establishing our services, is revealed that as a priority, that if we want our staff to give customers a really good service we need to be modern. We need to, ensure that all of our, systems, processes, IT, infrastructure is up to date, is automated, so we can make it easier for, customers to communicate with us and for us to communicate with customers. We're very early on that journey, there's a lot to do, but it's a central plank of the strategy, going forward. A very much one that, staff buy into, because, once we achieve our objectives, it will make it easier for them to deliver the good services that they want to give.

[00:11:44] **Lee:** Mm. And you mentioned staff buy in, what have been the levers you've pulled on to try and get that buy in along the way?

[00:11:53] **Sheron:** Well, A, I think as a leader, you need to be approachable. You need to be present. So although we have hybrid working at Hexagon, I make sure that I'm in the building two or three times a week. I'll do my blogs on Hive. We'll have quarterly full staff meetings. We call them team briefs. there's all sorts of things that I need to do to keep on communicating so people know what we're up to.

[00:12:18] and, so I think that there's various elements of that. So if I sort of step back a bit and break it down. one of the things that I've put in place is, is our five year corporate plan. And it's, it was important to me how I went about doing that. So coming into the organization, I took on this role.

[00:12:35] In June of 2022. so just over a year in post. And in my first few months, it was very much about listening. rather than coming in with preconceived ideas, it was very much about listening. It was going to all of the meetings. It was going to the board meetings, staff meetings, etc. And really hearing, all the good things that the organisation's doing, but all of the other things, the unrealised ambitions that it had yet to achieve.

[00:13:02] and along the way, we've had joint working with the board, at board away days. We've had, away days with the executive team. We've had conversations with the managers and directors, feedback from staff, from team briefs. And the cogs of my brain were just churning through all of that engagement and constantly thinking about, this is what people are telling me.

[00:13:23] **Lee:** Hmm.

[00:13:24] **Sheron:** and I, I do think a central plank of getting buy in is really listening to what people are telling you and then feeding that back in your approach. I've, I've heard you've said this, this is what I'm thinking, I'm interpreting that and I'm thinking this is what we need to be doing about that and having those conversations along the way.

[00:13:45] So at the point when we launched our five year corporate plan, which I think it was about March of this year, There wasn't really anything in there that was a surprise to anyone. A number of people have fed back to me, it reflected their reality, that we do need to have a bit of a reset, in, in this new world that we're working in, post lockdown, can't say post COVID because we've still got COVID, but, post lockdown, we needed to work in a different way.

[00:14:11] people could recognize that the tools that we were saying we need to put in place, they could recognize that they need all of those things. But I started off from a really good place, which is, I came into an organization where it's a really nice place to work, staff are really supportive of each other, there's a real willingness and desire to do good for the community. A lot of people who work for Hexagon, live in the communities that we serve. so the desire to do good was already there. you're sort of pushing on an open door, so to speak. my job really was to hear their, their thoughts, ideas about how we can move things forward, and package that in a deliverable way.

[00:14:57] So I think it's halfway there. The job that I will have to maintain that staff buy in is that it now it's all about delivery. We've taken time with our cultural values We worked with staff and tenants to co design the cultural values so the work has gone into listening sharing co designing what we need to do the proof now is in the pudding now It's all about delivery because we can lose that goodwill and trust very quickly If people are not seeing change happen as fast as they would like to see it happen.

[00:15:33] So that's the journey that we're on now. I'm working with, because, modernizing in terms of our IT infrastructure is very much part of our priorities

for the first year or two of that plan. So I'm working very closely with the project manager. to just make sure that those deliverables, are being met, but also that we have a good communication plan.

[00:15:57] So everybody is, up to speed with what's happening, what we've achieved and what we've yet to achieve, but we're making progress on. So it kind of keeps that confidence that, things are happening.

[00:16:09] **Lee:** Yeah. I really love that way that you framed, almost that uncovering of people's unrealized ambitions, because I think that's such a nice way to present something, particularly if you're new in an organization and often leaders can come in with the, this is my vision and this is what I want to achieve and haven't done that sense check. And actually you've given permission to people to say, all I want to do is make your dreams come true almost in a way, isn't it?

[00:16:35] **Sheron:** Well, one of the things that I always remember in my role, in, as with most charitable organization, Hexagon isn't my company. Hexagon is a company that has appointed me as its chief executive. it's got a vision, it's got a mission. It was here before me and it will be here after me. So I am very aware that I sit in this seat as a custodian of the charitable objectives, which the board ultimately need to set.

[00:17:09] so I think that's why it's, it's important that I remember that, give myself a bit of humility in my role. Of course, I'll come to the table with some ideas. I've been in the business for nearly 40 years. I've worked for a number of organizations. You see different approaches in different places and the value I think I bring to the table, it's bringing that experience with me to this role and having some ideas about how we could do things in a different way. people will share to me, Oh, we need to do this, we need to do that. but then I can say, well, have we thought about this? Have you tried that? Or actually, I'm not sure that that's the right thing to do because of these reasons.

[00:17:48] **Lee:** Hmm.

[00:17:49] **Sheron:** So I think it's helpful when you can come in as a leader and your staff, your board, your stakeholders feel that you're knowledgeable about your subject, you're clear. and I think particularly at Hexagon now, and because of the operating environment that we're working in, which has been quite challenging for housing associations of late, bringing us a calmness to, working through those changes. Because once you've been in the business for a while, you kind of realize that the challenges that you face, you've seen them in

different places, just in slightly different ways. and there are different approaches and there are other people out there and you build up your networks and networks are really important, I think, for leaders.

[00:18:35] You build up your network so you have, good people around you that you can share your experiences with and you can share their, their stories about how they've tackled similar issues or how they've realized new ambitions. and, all of that adds value to how I will fulfill my role as custodian of Hexagon while I'm its leader.

[00:18:59] **Lee:** you've mentioned the, the role of the board and of your executive team; one of the things when I work with leaders we focus on is how you get that alignment. And obviously that's probably been a priority for you in this first year as you've been developing the strategy and whatnot. So how have you approached building alignment with that most senior team?

[00:19:21] **Sheron:** You have to keep the conversation going, and it takes time. On our board, we have a collective of people with different interests. And, on any given subject, there'll be one person who feels more passionate about one thing than another and, and people who will want to push on a particular ambition more than another.

[00:19:44] one of the things that I work with my senior team to always do, it's to come ready but first of all, to create those spaces for conversation. the board meetings, they've got busy and full agenda. So that's not the place to do it. So we'll have our time where we have away days where we're away from the phones, we're away from the office. The executive is working with the board and when we're sharing new ideas or new approaches or we're relaying anxieties, it's really about coming to those spaces prepared with the facts. We come with some evidence about what is happening in our external environment, what is happening within the organization, what are some of the options in terms of how we can we can deal with all of those things? What's our chosen preferred option and why? And then, the board can have, they can have various different opinions with that, but I think it's about managing a conversation, coming to the table, being prepared and willing to Accept that there are two or three different ways that you can approach something and that you genuinely give people the space, to have that debate and to come to a solution, a conclusion that you're all happy to into and share.

[00:21:02] I think if you, if you start a conversation with a very fixed idea that this is the only way that we're going to do this you can lose people very quickly. I find generally speaking that, when people feel that they've been heard, then

they can hear you, so there's constantly that kind of back and forth in, in the relationship, and, know, you've got some experience behind you've got some ideas and, once you built up that trust, it gets easier as time goes along to get buy in for some of your ideas. But, I've got a good board and I've got a chair that if they don't agree, they'll say so, and that's okay.

[00:21:38] **Lee:** yeah.

[00:21:39] **Sheron:** and it's also about making people feel that, it's okay to have a different view.

[00:21:43] actually, your idea is really good. Let's try that.

[00:21:47] **Lee:** This might actually bridge quite well into, I wanted to go back about your comment around your values that you've been developing and the culture work that you've done. I suppose I want to know, and I'm not saying this of your organization, but in other organizations the values end up becoming a poster that gets stuck up on a wall and everyone doesn't really live by them.

[00:22:06] I'd love to know, as a leader, how you're testing that it's working.

[00:22:12] **Sheron:** Well you have to keep on going with it. So we, we had our workshops where we co designed our values were in February and March of this year. And, as the starting point, as I mentioned before, it is about making sure that the values that you come out with, people can look into a mirror and they can recognize it.

[00:22:35] they can recognize actually that is absolutely what we need to do, that's absolutely what we need to be standing for. That absolutely makes sense. so I think when the feedback I've had from, customers and, staff is that yes, they're the right things, but I have had to have that conversation constantly since we drew up those values. So in the team meetings throughout, this year, and I had a meeting on Monday, I'll go to the team meetings just to talk about culture, but the conversation isn't then about acronyms on the wall. It is about what's getting in the way of doing that. And you can find out all sorts of nuggets. You can find out what's happening over in this team and what's happening over there. and that's to me how you make culture come alive, it's not everybody being able to chant the mantra.

[00:23:25] **Lee:** Mm.

[00:23:25] **Sheron:** It is understanding if we want people to behave in this way, What is stopping them from doing that?

[00:23:33] And sometimes it can be not understanding something. another person not giving somebody something. not being aware of something. There's a story behind it. And it's constantly unpicking that, understanding that, and dealing with all of those individual blockers as you find them to move things on and I don't think you ever get there I don't know that any organization gets there.

[00:23:59] I think with culture it's about Being really conscious of what you want to achieve and making sure that that is part of your everyday conversation. So it will be part of our annual appraisals. It will be part of our, we've got a template for when people are having their performance review meetings with staff.

[00:24:18] We'll raise it within team meetings. when I go to other people's team meetings, we'll have that conversation. and we have training, which is designed around our values. So I think it is that we have got into the steady flow of it being a routine conversation or where we are seeing behaviors that go against it, the typical thing is, is that, somebody has a bad day, they really wanted to do a great job, but, they feel that they're getting all sorts of pressure, they get onto the phone with a customer, the customer hasn't been very nice to them and they come away thinking, Ha ha ha ha, and that can be an internal customer, a colleague, somebody from another department that's making demands or something.

[00:25:01] And I think it's just reminding people about how you would feel if you're in those shoes and actually you just need to be conscious of it. It's absolutely okay to have days where you feel negatively. The message I always share with everybody is because I think this whole notion that you don't have biases is nonsense.

[00:25:20] I think everybody has biases, conscious or unconscious. What you're familiar with, what you prefer. All of those things shape biases. I think the most that we can ask of people is just to be conscious of them.

[00:25:33] **Lee:** Yeah.

[00:25:33] **Sheron:** and be conscious of when they can get in the way of you treating people unfairly.

[00:25:40] **Lee:** Mm.

[00:25:40] **Sheron:** and when you're in an environment, when you're dealing with customers, there are opportunities every single day, every single hour of your working day for those biases to come to the fore because you will come across or people will say something to you that will trigger you, it comes with the job.

[00:25:57] so I don't have the unrealistic expectation that those things go away. I think you just need to be really conscious of it. and one of the things that we might always also need to think about is how do we equip people with the tools that they need to deal with those triggers when those triggers occur, how can they give themselves space to step away from the phone if they're in the customer services team and have a moment?

[00:26:22] what are the different things that we can do so that that person could say, look, I need time out. I need to sit in a dark room somewhere for a few minutes and come back to this. but it's all of those everyday things I think that makes the difference to creating culture. But I, I, I think it's always a work in progress.

[00:26:40] **Lee:** I first came across you probably, I think it was last year. And it was a video that you did for international women's day and you spoke about not allowing other people's perceptions of who you are and what you should be as a leader to define you. Can you share a bit about what your experience has been and how you've tried to overcome perhaps the barriers that you might've faced in your career?

[00:27:05] **Sheron:** First of all, I'll say that, I'm 58 years old now, and, and there is something I think that comes with age and maturity where you kind of settle into yourself eventually,

[00:27:15] **Lee:** Yeah, yeah, I know that feeling.

[00:27:18] **Sheron:** But at the early part of the, the career, I've faced it, and I think most people face it. You always have this challenge of am I the leader that people expect me to be? you can't help but to second guess yourself or question yourself.

[00:27:32] And we all have those in small and large ways, throughout our career. so I think when you heard me speak on, on International Women's Day, it was really reflecting on that. And when I have felt most comfortable and

when I have felt that I have given The best of myself as a leader is when I have consciously questioned, which organizations do I want to lead? It can be challenging, I feel, for a leader to be in an organization that really doesn't fit with their culture and values, because you're constantly making compromises. do you fit in?

[00:28:14] **Lee:** mm,

[00:28:15] **Sheron:** And, I remember, kind of many years ago, going for an interview for an organization, fortunately, I didn't get it.

[00:28:22] But, it was a very boisterous, kind of heavy drinking, out on the town and so on. If I'd got that job, I would have found it very difficult because that's not what I like to do. It's not how I like to spend my time. but if you're a leader in those environments, and I've heard these stories from so many different people in different ways, you feel that you have to blend in with the senior culture of the organization.

[00:28:50] You need to be seen to be playing the part. I've, I've been fortunate to, in most jobs that I've secured, to be working in organizations where my values feel at home within the values of that organization.

[00:29:08] **Lee:** mm,

[00:29:09] **Sheron:** And I think it's really important if somebody is in, even a managerial position, I'm not necessarily saying the most senior leaders within the company, that if you continuously feel compromised, undermined, all of those things, there are other places to work.

[00:29:28] And I think where you get to the stage where you value yourself as a person is when you recognize that within yourself that you know what I bring something to the table here and if you don't value it, then I will take it to where it will be valued.

[00:29:45] **Lee:** mm,

[00:29:46] **Sheron:** and it's not necessarily, it's easier for me to say that at this point of my career, but I think it is so important. I've seen so many people feel diminished and lose confidence when they've stayed longer than they should in organizations that don't value them

[00:30:04] **Lee:** Mm,

[00:30:05] **Sheron:** and, and the confident, vibrant, energetic, full of ideas person becomes, lacking of confidence, second guessing, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:30:16] So that's the advice that I give you from mentoring anyone and they, feeling very kind of challenged in the work environment that they're in. It's one of the conversations that I would have, it's not always about you, although some of it is.

[00:30:32] **Lee:** mm,

[00:30:32] **Sheron:** but it's also about, I liked, I, one of the books that I read many years ago, which I always draw on is Steve Covey's book, seven Habits of

[00:30:42] **Lee:** mm.

[00:30:43] **Sheron:** Effective People.

[00:30:45] And the thing that stayed with me from that book is that, that term about being response able, and you can't, control the way that other people may behave, but you can control the way you choose to respond to it.

[00:30:59] **Lee:** Yeah.

[00:31:01] **Sheron:** And that stayed with me. And at times when I kind of feel, Oh, I'm not sure about the situation, that's one of the sayings that will come back into my head.

[00:31:09] You do have some choices, you may feel that you don't, but you do have some choices and, and, It's about encouraging people to feel confident to make the right choice for them. You spend most of your life in work. If you're fortunate to have a job, and you're more fortunate to have a job you enjoy, you spend more time in this environment than you do with your family and friends,

[00:31:34] So why do you want to be in an environment that just causes you a lot of pain?

[00:31:39] **Lee:** Yeah. Yeah. I totally get that. One of the things that I've grappled with for a while now, and I've had many conversations with people about it, is the sense of knowing when you should be challenging and seeking the change from within and when it's time to walk away. Because there's something for me about, we see that in, in maybe more toxic organisations that

the good people leave and then the, the kind of toxicity rises to the top and stays there and is it ever going to change if people don't challenge and change?

[00:32:16] And it's a real burden to put on people as well to be the change. And I, and I, I haven't got an answer for it. And so I just wondered what your thoughts were really?

[00:32:24] **Sheron:** Oh, don't get me wrong. I mean, when I was young, I was, I was very much up for challenging everything that moved when I was young in my career. So I do think that, but, but, in my early, the early parts of my career, I, I worked for, a couple of organizations that were challenged. I'll give you an example of one.

[00:32:42] I started my career in the mid eighties and around that time there was a, a report about racism within housing. and, there were a number of housing associations at that time, when that, the Commission for Racial Equality published that report, that suddenly recognized, oh sugar, we, we don't really have very many black and brown staff. We need to do something about it. And certainly, the first housing association that I worked for, and I certainly think also the second one that I worked for in the 80s, they began to recruit people from the local community, partly because of the influence of that report. But in terms of the mindsets of those organisations, They hadn't really changed. I remember then, stepping into organizations. I remember the first one, I smile now when I look back on it. but, it was where, people in the maintenance team would have naked women on the walls. And, I remember I saw something on photocopier, which had some jokes in it, which were blatantly racist jokes.

[00:33:50] And I remember when I took this copy off of the photocopier and marched to the manager's office and said this is not acceptable and I became a union rep and you do all of those things. I absolutely do believe that it's right to make change within an organization. I wouldn't necessarily say that I felt uncomfortable in those organizations when I was advocating for that change.

[00:34:14] I had colleagues there that I really enjoyed working with, we had a good social life I had the fire in my belly to stand up for myself and what have you so I don't necessarily equate not feeling valued or it not being the right place with you in being in an environment that is just dull and nothing's happening. If you have that energy, if you have that that in your belly, if you're a change maker and you've got that support knock yourself out. I think that that's absolutely right. I think it's understanding the two there's a difference between going in making that choice that this is important enough for me, but I want to make these changes and I have enough support around me, to feel

empowered to make that change and then it can be a very positive thing and I thoroughly enjoyed my time shaking things up in those early days. But I think it's very, very different. Unfortunately, I haven't personally faced, sexual harassment in the workplace or anything of that nature. But I've known people who have. I've known people who've constantly been overlooked for promotion for no other reason than they don't fit in.

[00:35:28] Some of the choices I've made for who I will work for are because I think it's more likely, never definite, but it's more likely that they are organizations that would value somebody that looks like me, five foot nothing, black woman with dimples, that they would see me as somebody who could potentially lead their organization.

[00:35:52] But there are some people who have gone into careers in organizations where they're not that open to whatever diversity strands they're not open to. And it can be very difficult for those people. At some stage, I think, yes, yes, make that change within because somebody has to be the change maker, but also recognize that it should be your choice.

[00:36:13] **Lee:** Yeah.

[00:36:13] **Sheron:** if you want to be a change maker in those environments, and it's your choice, you've got the tenacity, and you'd like a bit of a, you'd like a bit of a tussle, go for it, but it has to be your choice. I think once it gets to the point where it's diminishing you, it's affecting your confidence, I think that that's time to think, is this the right environment for me? I've done as much as I can, I think all of us owe a responsibility to ourselves and our mental health, whichever level you are in an organization, and if a challenge at work is getting to the point where it's affecting somebody's mental health, I think at that stage, even if, you don't think of it as mental health, even if it is about, those very early stages of depression or anxiety or so on. I think if it's getting to that stage with somebody, they first owe the duty to themselves about whether this is the right environment for me.

[00:37:09] Those kind of like extreme examples and people might be on different parts of that, that pendulum. But, as an extreme example, that's one of the circumstances in which I would say, something that could be an enjoyable challenge, can start to be not healthy for you, and can start to diminish you, and I think that, at that point, people really do need to think whether it's the right place for them.

[00:37:31] **Lee:** Yeah. I think that's a really important internal red flag for people, isn't it? To just to, to be mindful of what's happening to me and my body and what's this telling me and whether I should fight or flight, I suppose.

[00:37:46] **Sheron:** Yes. Yes. Yes.

[00:37:48] **Lee:** We get into the end of our time together, but I've got a couple of final questions.

[00:37:51] what's the hardest part of leading for you?

[00:37:56] **Sheron:** Gosh, that's a really good question. What is the hardest part of leading for me? I like to feel that I have got the trust and confidence of people around me. it gets very difficult if you don't feel you have that. it's encouraging and it's motivating, I think, when you feel that you have that. with that, I'm pretty resilient, so most of the organizations that I've led have had big challenges. I can see my way through that if there's trust and confidence, I have a team that's supporting me. I think when things can get difficult, probably experienced this one or two times myself and I've certainly seen the extremes of this with other people, if you're working at a senior level in an organization, if you're working as a chief executive and you have an executive team that don't support you, that can make life very difficult. If you've got an executive team or a board that don't support you, it can make life very difficult. I think if you have those, you can share that burden of leadership for the things that you need to do with the business, but if you don't have that, that can be very tricky.

[00:39:08] fortunately, that hasn't been a, a, a big, problem that I've had throughout my career, but I have, I have faced it occasionally.

[00:39:17] **Lee:** What do you do to switch off , so you're not in CEO mode all the time?

[00:39:23] **Sheron:** I must admit that work life balance is something that I need to continue to work on. I'm a bit of a workaholic, I've been known to do the odd weekends, I go through phases, if the job demands my time, I'll give the job my time. when things are more settled, I like to go on holidays, I'm partial to, the odd nonsense stuff on Netflix, I love, interior designs. I love decorating. I'm always changing something in the house, give me a paintbrush, pottering around in the garden. all of those things that, those activities where your, your mind just go. It's not to say your mind goes blank, you're kind of thinking about something, but you know, the sorts of activities where you can just sort of just wander off into your own little worlds and you're not thinking about, you're not

trying to solve anything, you know, you're just wanting to get this weed out. Those are the things that I do, you know, read a book, nothing exciting you know I'm very dull outside of work, but those are the sort of things that help me to relax.

[00:40:24] **Lee:** Don't say it's dull because that's making judgment on my life too there.

[00:40:28] **Sheron:** We'll try to make ourselves sound more exciting when we actually do. Oh,

[00:40:32] **Lee:** So my final question is, what's the one piece of advice you'd give to an aspiring chief executive?

[00:40:38] **Sheron:** I think you need to understand why you want to be a chief executive. you need to, you need to understand what's driving that. I think you need to be optimistic. You're going to face difficulties and, I feel that you have to have the belief that with your input, with the support of people, you can make things better.

[00:41:00] I think you should listen more than you talk. I, I spoke earlier on about, really kind of understanding what people need. I think whether you're working within the private sector, the public sector, the charitable sector, essentially you are there to deliver what the customer needs. And you need to spend some time to understand that within an organization.

[00:41:21] You need to understand what the staff need to be able to deliver what you need them to deliver. So listening more than you talk, I think is really important. But you do need to have an end goal in mind. one of my first jobs that I had as a managing director, I remember I turned up, on the doorstep first day, and the, the one member of staff that I had, because it was a new organization I had to build up, and the one member of staff that I had, the first question she asked me as I got through the door, is what's your strategy for the organization?

[00:41:52] and what was going in my head is like, can I put my bag down first? But very, very quickly, people do look to you to have an idea. You may not have, you do need to listen and all of the things that I said, but people want you to have clarity. People want to know where are we heading. What do you believe in. What do you want to do. do assemble your ideas, do your research, talk to people, do all of those things. But going into a job, I always ask myself this question. If I got that job, what do I want to do with it? What do I want to

do with that place? What is it that, do I want to make them more ambitious? Do I want to help them to get over a difficult situation? What is it that I'm wanting to do? I think you need to be clear about that before you step into a leadership role.

[00:42:40] **Lee:** I love that. I think that's perfect point in which to end and a great reflection for others who are perhaps about to move into that next role. Thank you so much for your time today. If people want to give their own feedback and to say thank you for all the insights you've given. Where can they find you online?

[00:43:00] **Sheron:** Find me on LinkedIn. You can find me on, oh, it's called X now, rather than Twitter. But I'm more active on, on LinkedIn.

[00:43:07] **Lee:** I will put the links in the show notes for people who want to connect and say hi to you. Well, thank you again for your time. I really appreciate it.

[00:43:15] If you enjoyed this episode, please let me know on apple podcasts or on your app of choice. And drop me a line over on LinkedIn. You can find me at Lee Griffith. I'll be back with the next episode in two weeks time. So in the meantime, remember to sign up to my newsletter at www.sundayskies.com to get notified of new episodes, guest appearances, and further insights on how to lead with impact. Until next time.