Lunch with Anthony Wilkes

**Sarah Corcoran**

Alright. Well, we might make a start and welcome everyone. I'm Sarah Corcoran, chief executive officer at Plant Health Australia. So just a little bit of housekeeping before we commence. Please ensure that your microphones are on mute. We will be recording today's event and there's going to be some time for Q&A at the end of today's event. So you can raise your hand or place questions and comments in the chat and we'll keep an eye on that.

So today I come to you from Ngunnawal Land and I pay my respects to traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and to elders past and present. I'll be your host for today's NAPCaRN Lunch with Leaders series. We were going to spend some time with our guest speaker Anthony Wilkes. Hailing from the picturesque and fertile lands of WA's Southwest, Anthony will take us on a journey from being a young lad connected to his family's farm, working with his brothers and his parents.

To build their dream and where they experience the tough times that come from earning a living off the land and also realising the potential of what comes from hard work and dedication.

To now the present day being an accomplished visionary for Agri business, confident in his ability to take on the next big challenge and give Australia's agricultural industries every opportunity to succeed.

Earlier this week, we spent some time on the phone, learning a bit more about one another and one of the things that struck me about the conversation is the art of storytelling, and it is one of the great pleasures for me, working in agricultural industries and coming from a farming background myself, the connection that comes from hearing about another person's experiences and how they've welcomed opportunity with open arms is inspiring. And I know that you're really going to enjoy this next hour with Anthony.

So when we spoke, we spoke about the developmental process of leadership that comes from a passion to succeed and make a difference and it's one that many of us will relate to, and I have a passion for biosecurity that's seen me dedicate my career to the prevention, response and recovery from pests and diseases that threaten our economy, community and Australia's unique environment.

So every job that you have, it really prepares you for what's next. And I'm currently in the most important role I've ever held in my career, leading the Plant Health Australia team to build and maintain government and industry partnerships that are the strength of our nation's biosecurity.

And in the lead up to being CEO, my experience as a biosecurity professional grew from working in the Australian government as well as the Queensland and NT governments building expertise in biosecurity, emergency response, eradication, regulation, science and innovation.

I've overseen biosecurity research, including disease detection, management and response, as well as investment in infrastructure to support these activities, and that's been across sectors.

And it's this experience that allows me to implement consistent national approaches and through the work of Plant Health Australia, create a strong and resilient system built on connected strategies and partnerships, effective and efficient response and recovery and leverage data and of course integrated technology so we can face biosecurity threats.

My career has also included simultaneous experience as an Army Reserve specialist services officer, supporting the health and well-being of Australian Defence Force of the Australian Defence Force through research and operational activities.

And when I reflect the biosecurity space and the military share many symmetries where defence of our borders and preserving our way of life is the goal, and if they're breached, then a Defence Force mobilises and a campaign to stop the enemy in their tracks is implemented.

And it's been the service and sacrifice that has made a valuable contribution to my leadership abilities, and I've worked with an array of people over time, delivering outcomes where the results are a change for the better. And I've learned a few leadership tips along the way that I did want to share with you. So firstly, get involved. It's a high paced virtual world and it's really easy to slip into leadership by e-mail. So make that effort to connect with your team and connect with your clients and your stakeholders over the phone, virtually or in person.

And go walk a day in their shoes to develop empathy and understanding. And it's through these positive interactions that you'll create a lasting legacy.

Secondly, recognise your emerging leaders and empower them to take the initiative and make decisions. Teach them to make intelligent gambles and improvise along the way. It's an a supportive environment that fosters productivity and creativity.

Thirdly, make time for self reflection and think about the experiences that have shaped you as a person today. They're important things for people to understand and know about you, not just your successes and achievements, but also what challenges, trials and tribulations that you’ve been through.

And by sharing those things, you help others learn from those experiences, and it's a great key to connecting and authenticity with the people you engage with throughout your life. And finally, to grow leadership skills, you need to identify problems and develop solutions. So I'm a renovator. I'm a renovator at home and in the workplace, and I love creating, collaborating, and advancing to improve and transform. This is what challenges and rewards me.

So it is now my great pleasure to hand over to Anthony, who will share his experiences as a leader and how recognising and helping people to achieve to the best of their abilities creates a positive team culture that strives for success while having some enjoyment along the way. Thanks so much, Anthony, over to you.

**Anthony Wilkes**
Thanks, Sarah, and thanks everyone for joining online and spending your day listening to, I guess, a bit of my background. And I think as Sarah said, I think the storytelling is part of creating not only a product’s brand, but it's also your own brand. So I think I always like to get quite personal with my team and my various jobs that I've had along the way. So I thought I'd just share with you, I guess my background in a little part, a little remote part of WA, a place called Rocky Gully which was where my parents farmed and where I grew up. And I guess that was back in the 70s, but back in 1949, I think it was, they had the war service Land Settlement scheme and essentially there was 68 farms of 1000 acres each and returned soldiers were basically given the 1000 acres, a house, a dam, 300 sheep, a knapsack in case they had fire and basically were told to go and create a farm. And I guess you sort of think back and it's not that long ago

But basically, back then, they were given the bush block and you know, back where we grew up, it's, you know, huge Jarrah trees, quite undulating. It's called Rocky Gully for a reason, lots of rocks, and basically they had to clear that land on their own. And if you sort of imagine young people being told that's what they had to do today, I don't think that experience, that hardship or would be prepared for the fight.

And my grandfather, he wasn't one of those returned soldiers, but he was a log truck driver for the timber industry and he went there for two weeks and that became the rest of his life. But I guess I look back on that childhood and I've got two younger brothers and I think you just could not have got a better childhood growing up on a farm. And I think it was a real privilege and now living in the city, I just, you know, you crave for that, that opportunity to have kids grow up on farms. I think the adventure, the resilience, the life skills, I think it's pretty much second to none, but it's not without hardships. And I remember, you know, I think it was 1991, my parents decided to buy a farm in, I think it was 1989. It was predominantly a merino sheep farm.

And then the Australian Reserve Price scheme on Wool collapsed and you know, people were getting 1000 cents a kilo, went down to 430 cents a kilo. Things got pretty dire. They introduced the flock reduction scheme and basically farmers were getting I think it was around $1.80 per sheep cold or they were getting $6 to basically kill young sheep that were sort of aged between 6 and 15 months. It was just horrible. I still remember, you know, Dad saying, can you go over and help, you know, get rid of some of these sheep and you had tears in your eyes. It was just perfectly good animals. And I think, you know, it was pretty tough going. And I think you look at last year when here in WA Sheep are back down to $2-$3 a head again.

And back then, I think, you know, we had something like 160 odd million shape our total flock now is around 67 million. So I think when you live that journey of what sheep farmers and I'll use them as one example, have gone through, anyone jumping into agriculture, you have to be resilient and you have to ride the ups and downs and there's so many factors outside of your control.

I think you know there was wheat quotas back then, even in the vineyard, and you probably have gathered that I like red wine and red meat. It's been a bit of a character trait of my journey, but I think even in the wine industry in the 80s, they had the buy and pull scheme. And, you know, you read last week's Australian in the Riverland. There's grapes not being harvested and or selling for $150 a tonne and their cost of goods of growing them are around $300. So you think, what have we done in 50 or 60 years? We're sort of still in the same space and, you know, where's the value creation and the profitability for people to keep going.

So it's certainly even as we were kids, you know, things were pretty tough going. There wasn't a lot of money, particularly after buying a farm, then the reserve price kept going and then they introduced a wool tax, which was 25%. So basically on top of company tax and everything else, one in four years, you're essentially working for nothing. But I never look back and remember my childhood as being tough or hard. I thought if I look back now and think about it, we just had so much fun working together as a family and mum and dad couldn't afford to pay us boys for helping on the farm, but we just bogged in and got it done and then, you know, if we wanted a bit of pocket money, Dad would go and buy some skin pieces. So the bits that shearers would accidentally cut when they're shearing a sheep. And obviously that was low value. So we would go and sit in the shearing shed with musing shears cut off all the dry bits of skin. It's pretty boring, horrible work. But then we could then go and sell it and Dad would let us keep the money from it. So I guess, you know, back in those early days, and we're only primary school kids. When that was happening, you know, we learnt how to earn a dollar.

We learnt that not all jobs are good and fun, but you've got to do it. And but there's a means to an end and I think, you know, I even recall, as I guess became a little bit more entrepreneurial. It's probably 8 or 9 years of age. I started buying day old chickens with the money I made out of the wool cutting wool sales and then my I'd grow them and fatten them to six or eight weeks and sell, sell them locally. But I wouldn't sell them live. I'd sell them dressed and my grandma would come up and help because she always wanted to get the chicken livers out of it. And we, I guess, you know, these sort of little experiences and stories as what sort of, I guess defines you and creates you.

I then started working for one of our shearers who decided to plant grapes for wine down in the cooler part of the Great Southern and I think I was 11 or 12 years of age getting $4 an hour, but I always wanted to make sure I could get $50 a day, so you'd have to work 12 and 1/2 hours in the rain planting grapevines and that. And I think it just toughens you, but it also you just don't complain. You just get on and do it. And I think if we look at today, today's generation, I think they’ve had it pretty easy and I guess how do we get a culture back in Australia where people put up with a bit more and just are a bit more resilient and tough it out and learn just to do a do a fair day’s pay before you get rewarded.

But that I think is part of growing up in regional Australia. You just put up with things and you don't complain and I guess you know again the experience of growing up with your brothers, you didn't have neighbours so close that you could hang out with. So you really appreciated family. And I guess you learnt a lot of life skills with it. It was fencing or, you know, going out shooting.

You know, jumping on a tractor and planting crops, seeing, you know, one crop versus another and how things change with seasons and rainfall, you learn life and death with, you know, cows and sheep, you know, having calves and lambs and whatever. So I think that experience is pretty hard to get out of your blood. And as I guess I grow older, we went through high school and then into university. I guess you reflect back on it. And I think one of the things I loved about farming was the ability to grow something and then market it, but also the passion behind individual producers and why is your shiraz, different from your next door neighbour’s shiraz and it was all around provenance, but one thing my father who instilled in us is that we eat the best and we sell the rest. So I guess I always, you know loved food, loved wine and obviously have sort of carried that through the career. When I left university I thought I wanted to aim high. I knew with two younger brothers and with the cycle of the wool industry it was always going to be hard to go home to our family farm when you've got two younger siblings and land prices really started to go up because we had competing needs with the tax effective blue gum industry was coming in at the time and drove the price of land high. So that's when I thought oh well Heytesbury, they've got a lot of cattle properties, I've got wineries, I'll aim high and see if I can land a job there and part of our university course, we had to do six months professional practise. So I managed to get a placement with Heytesbury but they said, oh we don't pay, I thought, geez, how am I going to live in Perth renting a house without pay doing six months here.

Mum and Dad just said look go for it we think this will be a really great experience we'll help you out. And so I shared a shared a house with a mate and started with Heytesbury. And then within two weeks they said we're just testing your attitude. We wanted to see how committed you were. You better go get your passport because we're putting you on a cattle ship next week. So it was again, just present yourself. Get thrown some opportunities. And I was as nervous as all hell. I think from this shipment was going to Malaysia out of Fremantle and I've never been out of WA before and so I think by the time we got to Scarborough, probably I had drank 6 cans of beer and was pretty nervous of what the next 6-7 days ahead were going to be at that sea. But I was the only Aussie on the boat. We had a Filipino crew and Danish officers, but it was just the most amazing opportunity of a lifetime. And I just, I guess, built that confidence that it's a big world out there and you can go out and do whatever if you're prepared to just back yourself and take on a little bit of risk and, you know, don't worry about all the small things.

So that was, I guess a good entree into Heytesbury. And I guess sort of corporate agriculture and upon leaving university, I then started with Heytesbury and it was, I was just so fortuitous that Heytesbury had very good wine with Vasse Felix. And they had, you know, some amazing cattle stations in the north and even in, you know, I guess down the coast. And southern WA at the time.

My journey with Heytesbury I guess a young graduate was just amazing because I was in the Perth office, their head office, and they just gave me whatever project and you just sunk or swam. But you had good support.

And I think as a young graduate, it was again, like those early farming days. You basically go prove yourself. I'd get there 5 minutes early. I'd always stay a bit later. Just do that little bit extra to make sure you got, I guess, recognised. But also, you know, do a decent fair day's work and hope opportunities would, you know, be forthcoming. So that was just, I guess, an amazing time. I probably should divert back. I even when I was at uni I did another cattle ship trip to Cagayan and Oro in the Philippines where I looked at using electrolytes on weight loss in cattle on journeys with live export. And you get a really good appreciation. I think even, you know, fast forward 25-30 years on now and you see some of the issues that are being debated in that, I guess, animal welfare space and you know the industry has progressed so much and it's about, I guess how agriculture in particular can get its voice out there because we may contribute a lot to the economy and regional areas but we seem to have declining voices out there.

But all along, I guess I've been offered many opportunities at a young age and I really I guess I've just probably looked back and I've never said no, you just say yes to everything and you don't always get things right or you know sometimes you make mistakes. But I guess I've always learnt to look forward. You can't change the past. You live by the experience and it's good to look back to remember and learn from it. But I guess I've always looked forward and I guess that's probably set me up for you know. I guess when I first took on the CEO role at Ferngrove Wines, it was a public unlisted company. It was in a very challenging environment. I think I was 27 years of age at the time. And a lot of the people who were working there were considerably older than me and so you had to earn that respect, but really I guess was the first opportunity, really get me to work out. How do you manage people? And I think people at the end of the day are still the biggest asset of any company and it's a learning how you manage people particularly in regional areas, you don't always get what you want as far as availability. There's competition certainly over here in WA with the mines, but it's not looking at people's negatives, it's looking at their positives and how you put the jigsaw together. So you don't have square pegs in round holes.

And how do you motivate people? And it's not always money that can motivate people when you know when we're at Ferngrove, it was a pretty tough time in the wine industry. China hadn't actually opened up at the time as far as an export market. And we managed to attract a Chinese billionaire whose main business was making ball bearings, biggest ball bearing maker in the world. And he invested at 19-20%, eventually brought the whole company out and then wanted to buy some cattle properties as well. But at that time, there was a fair bit of stigma still around, I guess Chinese ownership in Australian agriculture.

And most of our staff were Aussies, just country people and all of a sudden to be told that you're going to be owned by a Chinese billionaire who doesn't speak English. It was a bit of fear, but you know that Chinese owner still owns that business now. And that was back in 2012-13. And I think it was a case of looking at how you, I guess, bring people along on the journey and keep them informed, marry up the cultural differences, but it great gave us a great opportunity pre-COVID to launch into China and we open up 80 shops called Ferngrove, again talking about branding.

And it was all about convincing people why our wine was superior to someone else's. And you know, we'd have bus loads of Chinese restauranteurs and distributors would come down to this remote part of WA in Franklin River, not far from where I grew up. And we would give them, you know, beautiful land, chops, wagyu fillet steaks, crayfish, prawns, and obviously serve with good wine. And it really just showcased you know what this country can produce. And we had great success with it. So I think those early days of travel being open to and not fearful of different cultures and marketplaces, but understanding the nuances and how they do business and being patient and learning to listen more than you talk at times. I think it's all just continued to build the story and I guess try to equip me on how to be able to you know I guess perform better and do.

Do your job at a higher level and I guess I get back to it's about people management and you know there's challenging times and in agriculture, there's so often the time we don't have the control of weather or marketplaces or if you look in particular you know with obviously the live cattle cessation back in 2011, but even post-COVID when we challenged the Chinese government and then they put 208% tariffs on wine after you've had a free trade agreement a couple of years ago and China has become the largest single export market and the highest profit per dollar market to basically evaporating from you know $1.2 billion to probably $10 million. And still not open. And so I think

that really it can be a frustrating journey to be in agriculture and it teaches you to be resilient, look at risk and how you how you adapt to risk, but you've got to keep positive. And I think that's the main thing when things go wrong and it can be hard when you know you've got financial pressure, but it's about how you continue to use resources and talk to people and make sure your staff are aligned and can see that there is light at the end of the tunnel and we've got to ride this out together.

So I guess I've always valued staff highly and the loyalty of it. And I think, you know, even today changing roles, I don't think I've ever had a easy CEO role where it's been on an upward trajectory. It's generally been dealing with crisis or challenges, but I guess like rolling the sleeves up and getting dirty and I always try and lead from the front. So there's nothing I wouldn't expect my staff to do if I wouldn't do it myself. And I think that's a pretty valuable lesson and particularly in agriculture, where you know you've got to treat people in a fairly flat structure, there's no prima donnas. And certainly I've never been one for egos or you know, people self patting themselves on the back.

And sometimes the right path's not always the easiest one, and I think often if when you go down those difficult paths, you know they do lead to success, but it demands perseverance, patience, humility and a willingness to confront challenges head on. So some of I guess the learnings that I sort of live by and try and instil in staff that work alongside me is to push yourself beyond limits. I think that's more rewarding if you just give it that extra bit of effort. Back yourself and give it a go. Always turn up with something useful. Just don't just be there and warm a seat. You've got to contribute. And I certainly even chairing the Northern Hub in my current role and also as an independent director of an Indigenous Corporation in the Kimberley. It's frustrating when people are on boards but they don't contribute. It's not about being there to get, you know in your name that I'm on XYZ board. If you're there you've got to contribute and trying to take the organisation forward and that's certainly what I try and do. But I also try and make sure that the people who work in the various organisations with me do the same.

The other one is, don't compromise your ethics and moral compass. That's probably why there comes a point where you've got to realise where you want to be in life and how you want your own reputation to be regarded. Build trust and credibility.

But also live and breathe it and be authentic and real. And I think you know, if you just be yourself, don't try and be someone you're not people trust and respect you and then they want to associate with you and again treat people how you like to be treated. The other thing was probably something again back even though my dad's no longer with me unfortunately. But he always taught us always shut the gate. Do the job properly the first time and don't take shortcuts and I think.

A valuable lesson that you know, sometimes you want to go from A to B and the quickest pathway possible, but life doesn't happen and you know sometimes you get bumps in the road and you've got to deviate go backwards before you can go forward. But make sure you do things properly.

You've also got to have fun and get stuff done life short and we're here to enjoy it and make an impact. So again, don't sweat the small stuff. And also I think particularly in a fast-paced business world, you've got to make sure you've got energy and you've also got to be prepared, particularly in the top job too which does intrude into your personal life that you've got to find that balance and make sure you've got time for family time and you know, I've got a 12 and a 15 year old kid. The 15 year old daughter is in Sydney waiting to go to Taylor Swift, but it's about trying to find that balance so that you know, they, they, they're quickly going through your childhood and they use you want to enjoy those childhood years with your own kids. So without dragging on too long. I think being an effective leader is really how you relate to others.

And make sure that you give them a go so they can, you know, they can show on and blossom and they've got to take a risk at some point. And you can't micromanage them the whole time and give them the opportunity to build on their own their own careers.

Importantly, though, I think culture is first and foremost. I think culture can always trump organisational structure, because I think culture is the product of relationships and interpersonal behaviour, which are very much the foundation for achieving influence and change and communication. I think so often issues within organisations comes down to communication and either not being clear or not having enough regular or effective communication. I think you know certainly a lot of issues I see is when people haven't understood or there hasn't been the right people at the table getting the pieces of information that need to take a business forward.

So I'm certainly happy to answer questions, but I think certainly being over here in WA, not that I'm a surfer, but I think we really need to live life like a surfer. And I guess what I mean by that is when a surfer gets up on a wave, they enjoy the present moment even though they know that with certainty that that wave will eventually end.

They fully enjoy this wave that we're on at the moment with the wisdom and awareness that there are always more waves coming.

So I think enjoy your next wave and embrace the present moment. Be strategic about your positioning in between waves. Pass on more waves rather than jumping at the first wave that comes your way. Always get in the water and stop sitting on the shore and roll with the punches that life deals you. So that's the sort of summary I guess of my journey, but happy to take questions and expand on any of that.

Sarah Corcoran
Fantastic. Thank you, Anthony. I enjoyed that parallel that you've just described for us of riding the wave, I'm sure a few people can relate to that. And yes, some great messaging there in your description of your career. And I think the reference to life's a big jigsaw say yes to opportunities and back yourself is a key message for us, and remember, and learn, but always look forward. I really enjoyed that as well.

So we're going to open it up now for some questions from the audience, and I'm sure you've got a few that you'd like to ask Anne.

**Anne Walters**
Thanks so much, Sarah, and thanks Anthony. That's fantastic. And I will jump in with the first question while everyone else is getting their questions together, Anthony, I really loved how authentic you know your story was and how you come across in such an authentic way. I'm just wondering if that's something that you've really worked on or is it just something that is naturally, you know, natural to your personality and leadership style?

**Anthony Wilkes**
Yeah. Look, I'm. I'm conscious of it, but I don't think I actually work on it. I think just that's my who I am. I very much enjoy people you know. And I am very much involved in the junior footy club and I think part of that is just being able to try and guide and direct people and take an organisation forward. But it's about again just communicating and being part of a community. And I, I don't know, I'm maybe very biassed the fact I grew up in a small country farm, farming region, but you just take nothing for granted and everyone you know, we'd have a Christmas lunch on the farm. And I remember then Christmas evening, Dad would just open it up to the community. Just come along, bring a salad, and your beers. We'll put the sheep on the BBQ before Christmas night. And it was just that open house policy. And I guess that's the way that I've lived my life, really, I guess, stemming from the way I was brought up.

Sarah Corcoran
Thank you. We have a question in the chat and then I'll go to Darren. So Lisa Hill has asked for a young person getting into ag as a career, how do you see the future of the industry?

Anthony Wilkes
Look, I'm extremely passionate about the ag industry and you know, a lot of my friends and farmers or connected in the industry. We've just had a vocab over here in Perth this week. I think it's got a bright future, but I don't think enough.

I don't certainly from a government point of view, I don't think they appreciate the value that agriculture brings to this country. And you know, I looked last week. The nickel industry is in, you know, going in turmoil and they're going to, the federal government's putting out a $4 billion subsidy or grant to help the nickel industry.

Where was the federal government helping out when the Chinese put the tariffs on the wine for the lobsters, you know, some of those, the beef industry back and they we can't even resolve the live export claim from 2011. I think, you know, we're talking much less money than $4 billion to help a mining industry that generally goes in cycles, generally owned by a lot of offshore funds and, you know, bigger businesses that can ride out or redirect their staff resources to other mines and the likes, I think agriculture.

You know if and I think COVID probably taught us all that more than ever and within states, you know, WA we were locked up as much as anyone, as a, as a separate country and then you look at, you know, when we have, you know, flooding across the Nullarbor, we can't get a vital, you know, food supplies. And that I think Australia will be at where an island and we're we've got such great produce it's clean and green and generally disease free. But I don't think we can take that for granted and I think you know industry organisations need to probably lift the tempo a bit about how important agriculture is and I think you know even in the Northern Hub that I chair, you know, there's a lot of good organisations on that board that have come together, which previously and I don't know, I think Jed's on the on the chat. We haven't always probably communicated across borders from the territory to the north of WA and the hub has really allowed that to facilitate and build some really good foundations and relationships. And with Charles Darwin Uni as the head of that hub with the federal government, I think there's some great career pathways and we just need to communicate and have more people who are on this chat, to I guess sell that back into the cities because obviously you know the population in regional Australia is declining. We've got ageing farmers. How do we encourage people to get back out into the bush? And, you know, there's some pretty amazing success stories out there.

Sarah Corcoran
Yeah, absolutely. And we certainly want the next generations to be coming through and come building up as leaders in agriculture. It's really key, key to Australia's food security and key to our future, maintaining that significant contribution from agriculture to Australia's GDP. OK. Thank you. We will go to Darren, Darren Peck next.

Darren Peck
Thanks, Sarah, and thanks Anthony for sharing a really inspiring journey. I really appreciate it. I've got a question. It's a bit of a double barrelled one. I'd like, I just wonder how you would describe your leadership style just in a couple of words and you've already touched on that, I know, but I'd be really keen to know, you know exactly how you see yourself as a leader. And the second question I have is just again very briefly, what do you think the biggest priorities are or the challenges are for agriculture in northern Australia at the moment? Thank you.

Anthony Wilkes
OK. Thanks Darren. As far as leadership style, I think I'd describe it very much as facilitative and I guess probably firm, but for firm and facilitative, so I guess I'd like to, I don't like small talk, just going around and around, we've got to move forward. So I think you've got to sort of nudge it forward, but certainly be facilitative and let everyone have their say because that's part of that communication journey and the minute you exclude people, you start to get I guess the division and I think you know Jed can quite.

Easily acknowledge, I guess, how we've, you know, I guess, come together in in the Northern Hub and bringing partners together that normally wouldn't be probably partners actually probably compete for funding pools and other times but we've got a fairly good balance there now. So as far as priorities go in Northern Australia, I think people, people and investment I think need to come together.

And just trying to recruit good people, getting him to live up there, what's the incentive? And I think that's also particularly younger people. It's about the school, I think school is a big factor these days in education. So you've got to be able to bring that piece. It's not just about one, you know, the husband or the wife or whatever, getting the job, it's how does it fit the whole family dynamics. And I think that's very important. And I think even when I was back at Heytesbury many years ago, which was quite male dominated back there, obviously it's changed So there's a lot more females involved in managerial positions out on cattle stations and the like now, but back then it was not about just keeping the guy happy. You have to keep the girl happy too, because if they're not both happy, it's not going to last. And I think that's got to be really fundamental about attracting good people to the north and then, you know, I look at the NAIF and I'm sort of going off tangent a little bit, but the NAIF infrastructure funding and that, you know, I think we need more of a leg up than, you know, just funding it. I think government can help kick start a lot of these.

You know be it say irrigation projects and things cotton up in the yard Ord in Katherine and those sorts of places. Now I think if the government could actually lend a hand, get it off and going and be like a facilitator, they can always pay it back in other ways. I think we’re acting too much like banks, or you know, commercial sort of operations. And I think the government can take a more leadership position by helping give legs up and giving that first seat capital a go. And, you know, I think there's a lot of opportunity that we're not exploring because.

The risk and the cost of doing things are too high for individual, but if we can co-partner somehow, I think we can achieve a lot more.

Sarah Corcoran
Fantastic. We've got some great questions coming through and I know there's some people waiting patiently with hands up, but I'm going to go back to the chat just for a moment. And Victoria Marshall has asked an Anthony

The fact that you value people, she's wondering how you demonstrate your appreciation whilst expecting high standards and improvement. How do you balance those two things?

Anthony Wilkes
A classic example was when I was CEO of Ferngrove wines. We end up getting purchased 100% by the Chinese billionaire.
There was a challenging time because he used to compute everything into labour in cost of labour in Chinese, in the in the Chinese economy and his ball bearing businesses and someone who's earning say, $7,000 or $8000 a year to work in a ball bearing factory. Then he'd come out and see someone on a tractor, you know, mowing the rows between the grape ones, getting $60,000 and just couldn't grasp why we're getting paid so much. But $60,000 wasn't a huge salary in that.

And then I'd go in each year to try and bat for him and ask for a pay rise. And that's probably why I left after five years.

It was at a too hard a task to go in after five years, but in that period and I was there for 13 years and the wine industry was always any time you did make a profit, you poured it straight back in. But every Christmas party, I would always hand write a personal card. We had about 70 staff. I'd hand write a personal card.

I got to know the family over time. We'd always give them a case of our best wine that we actually produced because they'd always all had a part in doing it, whether they were in the vineyard, the winery or winery or sales or whatever.

And we would just have a great day bringing you know, partners and kids along. And that was 13 years of doing that. And to this day, you know, some of those people, you know, still keep in contact, want to come and work for me. But it was about that personal element. And our chairman at the time was the former national managing partner of Free Hills. And on a lot of ASX boards and him and his wife would come along and they would make sure they'd never missed our Christmas parties because they said it was the most fun. And he said that was all about the feeling, the emotion and the people. And so they connected with the staff. And I think it's just.

Treat people how you want to be treated and I think that those experiences went so much further now at the end of the day, you people do need money and they do need to be rewarded. But in tough times you have to look outside the box. How else can you make people enjoy coming to work each day?

Sarah Corcoran
Thanks, Anthony. I think we're all a little envious of those Christmas parties. They sound like they were a lot of fun. OK, we're going to go to Chantelle. Chantelle O'Connor, if you would like to ask your question, go ahead.

O'Connor, Chantelle
Thank you. Hi, Anthony. You spoke about living life like a surfer with opportunities coming and going and that got me thinking about how you personally let your concerns come and go and what are the methods that you do to try to relax and destress.

Anthony Wilkes
Yeah, thanks for that, Chantelle. Definitely, I love work. But equally, I love, I guess I love my family. I've got two kids. I'm very invested in their sport and obviously that's for this period of this era I guess you know for another five or six years they they'll be off doing their own thing. So I guess I'm very heavily involved in all of their activities, but I love fishing. I love cooking. So I think they're cooking and eating good quality food. And you know, where's the best butcher where I love markets. Whenever I go overseas.

I will go and suss out of market. I don't care if it's a wet market. My wife probably doesn't enjoy those trips so much as I do, but I just love finding out different foods, places, what grows where, what's the cost of, you know, lamb chops in Hong Kong versus somewhere, you know, I guess I'm just naturally invested in in food and provenance and branding and looking at new ideas. So I really enjoy that sort of stuff, but I love fishing. Every year we go to Coral Bay in January, although it's about to get hit by a cyclone today, I think.

But and yeah, just love catching fish. And just that's the best opportunity just to totally be out of phone rage and destress.

O'Connor, Chantelle
Thank you for sharing.

Sarah Corcoran
Yeah, great. Thank you. OK, Jed, you've been waiting patiently over to you.

Jed Matz
Thanks very much. Hi, Anthony. Good to see you got my memo on which shirt we're wearing today.

I really enjoyed working under you and I learned a great deal which you know, you know, I've had a good chance to speak about. So that was great. But one thing I haven't done yet in my career is transition from work to boards. And I get asked a lot in my job.

How do you do that? And I can't answer that because I haven’t done it before.

You've seen to have made a good transition or balance of still being.

An executive, but also sitting on a few boards. Any advice for the group on how to go about that if people are interested in that or what you've learned in that process?

Anthony Wilkes
Yeah. Thanks Jed.

I think if I look back to, you know, when I was 27-28 and I was CEO of Ferngrove, I was relatively young for a public unlisted company, but the chairman who we had at the time.

It was just such a great mentor and but he was very, quite firm and had high expectations. But given that he was on ASX board, so even though we're an unlisted company, we basically acted as if we were listed so he would demand that we would have board papers out that had to be.

Short, efficient.

Basically, he was a busy person, so we usually only had two or three hour meetings, so papers had to be out a week in advance and you know, he was very methodical in following up and very supportive would check-in. So I guess I learnt a lot from him, but because I was CEO, I was practising it and doing it and I had done that for I guess 10 or 15 years before I really jumped on a board. But then in the wine industry, I was on the Wine Makers Federation of Australia board for a number of years.

And again, it was about, and that was a national board, so it was about learning and listening to a lot of the other people around you. But you also again, like I said earlier, you don't want to just sit there and warm a seat, you have to contribute. So if you're going to take on a board position, make sure you understand the risk because obviously it's not without risk and you need to do due diligence properly. But it's about making sure you can add value and again you know the MG Corporation is a board I've stepped on last year and in the in the Kimberley's and it's not without some challenges and it's.

But some family member issues there.

But you can sort of say, well, it's all too risky or too hard, but I think I can help add value and you know they've got some agricultural interest which we've been able to take forward and it's about just trying to, trying to help go from A to B and leave your legacy. So I guess I always come in with a positive can do attitude and.

As far as how do you transition, I think it's about trying to get on any board that can help you as a stepping stone to I guess you know ones that are probably you know at a high level be it over a ASX listed board. But and you know from the Northern Hub.

Again it's listening to people and as chair, it's about trying to listen to everyone and get everyone on the same page. So we're not just having a talkfest. We've got to get outcomes.

Sarah Corcoran
Thank you, Anthony. That's some sage advice for thinking about becoming a director and joining boards. There's lots of opportunities out there, which is always a good thing, so.

I'm going to go back to the chat now, and there's a question here from Reagan Lynch, who's noting that do you think that you've had many crossroad moments in your life noting that you've said yes to pretty much every opportunity that's been offered? And if so, if you've had those crossroad moments, what do you think were the major factors that influenced your choices at the time?

Anthony Wilkes
Yeah, there certainly has been crossroad moments. I think you know years ago, getting into the wine industry was probably, I got in at the time when that was on its downward cycle. My two younger brothers decided that I think they got the W and the M around the right way. They went into mining and I went into wine and I think obviously mining was on the way up and wine was on the way down, but you've still got to be happy in what you do and I think you know one of the other crossroad moments was particularly when I was CEO of Howard Park Wines, very beautiful winery, very prestigious wines and a family and but I always knew it was for a period in time that the younger generation within that family business were going to want to take on the leadership roles within.

That organisation, they weren't ready at the time, so I guess I helped them transition and I think it was probably cut a bit short. I think I could have added a lot more value but it was the time to go to let the family take on that business. So you've got to also I think appreciate when you can fight against the forces or it's like, well, I've done my job here. It's time to move on. It's a family business and at the end of the day, you've got to be sensitive to that. I went to head up Yeeda Pastoral Company, which was all in that sort of COVID space. It was pretty tough going.

And also it had a hospitality arm with the Bungle Bungle Caravan Park and also six cattle stations. Now that was probably my dream job, but you know it, I guess I got out of there because I wasn't aligned and I think I brought up one of those I guess those things that I live by, you need to you need to know when it's time to go if you don't believe you know the ethics or the morals and that so I guess that was a real crossroad moment. I don't regret leaving but I look at what could have been.

If it had the right ownership behind it, and I think it was a fairly unique opportunity and you know, hopefully it can be realised at some point, but I look back over the last two or three years. I'm glad I'm there. So and that's been pretty frank and open in this audience, but you've got to, you've got to know when it's time to walk.

Sarah Corcoran
We do appreciate that that transparency and frankness that you shared with us and in my head, I was thinking Kenny Rogers sang a song about that, know when to hold em and know when to fold em.

Any other questions while we've got this great opportunity?

Is there anything else that you wanted to add, Anthony?

Anthony Wilkes
No, I think we've covered a fair few topics. So I think you probably know a little bit more about me and where I've come from. But yeah, look happy to you know and obviously you know look forward to contributing in in certainly northern ag but ag in general you know certainly for the until the end of my career anyway.

Sarah Corcoran
What's next for you, do you think?

Anthony Wilkes
Look, I certainly enjoy the interaction on the boards, so I would certainly look at probably, yeah, going a bit more into that board you know and certainly not just confined here to WA or the north. There's a few other exciting opportunities I think and that look at I think we've said one of the questions about how do we get young people into ag and I think you know that's got to be I think all of our priorities is making sure people jump on and try and expand because it's not all about rocks and gas in this country. We do have a lot of other good things and we need to make sure that they get their share of voice and we continue to develop and expand it because we are quite unique and I know even, you know from a biosecurity point of view and you look at you know if lumpy skin or foot and mouth come into this country, the devastation that'll have on certainly our north and northeastern cattle industry. And I think it's got to be at the forefront that we all protect it because as consumers, we won't have the same choice or cost base that we have. If some of these things come into the country.

Sarah Corcoran
Thank you. That's a great shout out there for the biosecurity aspect of ag, which is an important component and one that we're all playing a part in. So yeah, really appreciate that. And I'm sure a few people might be reaching out to you after today and looking forward to having more exchange and discussion with you about how to get established in the ag industry if they're not already.

I think if there's no other questions we will thank you very much again for your sharing with us Anthony and do appreciate all of those thoughts and you know the experiences that you've had throughout your career and how you've applied yourself, what you've learnt, passing on that knowledge to us today, I reckon everyone will take away a key piece from today's discussion and be thinking about that. So thank you again and thank everyone and each of you for being here. I do appreciate it.

And we do appreciate it as part of the NAPCaRN. So please keep coming along. The next meeting is scheduled for the 15th of March and the speaker is Corporal Tina Hayward.

And if you're interested in being added to the e-mail distribution list, all you have to do is send an e-mail to Anne Walters and Anne will be able to make sure that you're a part of that. And if you are able, noting that we are just a little bit ahead of time, so fantastic.

If you're able to stay on just for a moment and complete a survey, we would also very much appreciate that as to how you enjoyed today's presentation and the lunchtime leadership series. So once again, thank you everyone.

And have a great afternoon and weekend.

Anthony Wilkes
Thanks very much.

O'Connor, Chantelle
Thank you.

Sarah Corcoran
Bye now.