

# Emerging Leaders with Michael Storozhev

## Interview Transcript

**Julia Lessing:** Hi, everyone. Today we're talking about making that transition from being an individual contributor to a people leader. And joining us for that discussion is experienced actuary and emerging people leader Michael Storozhev. Michael is an actuary with broad pricing, reserving and capital experience across different products and global markets.

Today he is the Chief Underwriting Officer at PassportCard Australia, a travel insurance specialist insurtech, combining his technical expertise, passion for customer-centricity and innovative mindset.

Michael looks to continue to make a meaningful impact in the industry, safeguarding travellers across the globe through a unique, real time claims processing proposition.

Michael is also deeply involved in the Actuaries Institute, volunteering on the Data Science Practice Committee, the Anti-Discrimination Practice Committee and the International Committee, and authoring and contributing to several research presentations. Michael, thank you so much for joining us.

**Michael Storozhev:** Thanks. Exciting to be here. Really appreciate the opportunity.

**Julia Lessing:** So, Michael, you're an experienced actuary who's been a strong individual contributor for most of your career. But recently you've stepped quite quickly into some really big people management roles. What prompted that change for you?

**Michael Storozhev:** Well, thanks, Julia. And reflecting back on my career. One thing I have to be really appreciative of is the strong mentors, both actuaries and non-actuaries to help me understand and navigate the different stages of my career. I've always enjoyed the technical focus of my actuarial roles, but over time I sought a deeper connection to customers and try to find and use my actuarial training to make a deeper impact in the insurance industry.

I've found that in travel insurance, which I actually accidentally landed in after taking a little bit of time off to pursue overseas studies and taking on what was supposed to be a six month temporary role but at Cover-More Travel Insurance, it actually turned out to be almost a seven year stint! And in that niche, in that product line, focusing on customer centricity and data driven innovation, even as an individual contributor, I found that I could maximize what I was involved in by leveraging the organization around me, collaborating. And to me, that was always critical. I wasn't a manager at the time, but I was still able to influence different parts of the company through that collaboration.

And so moving to a more traditional leadership or people management role seemed like the natural progression to help scale what I could contribute and be part of in an organization.

But amusingly, I don't actually have any direct reports right now. In an almost start-up mentality building the Australian arm of passport travel insurance, one of my key focuses this entire year will be building up the right dynamic team of actuaries, underwriters and data specialists. A new challenge!

**Julia Lessing:** That sounds like a great challenge, Michael. So it also sounds like it was kind of by accident that you ended up working in this space and that stepping into a people management role was one way that you could scale the impact that you could make and the way that you could help people and help customers by stepping into a management role as well as harnessing and leveraging your technical skills.

**Michael Storozhev:** That's it. And, you know, it took me a while to find where I could best contribute. But once I found the niche, once I found the product line, once I found the best way to help customers, I just wanted to find the most diverse and the most expansive way of achieving that.

**Julia Lessing:** That's really cool. And I remember hearing about the work that you did in in terms of mental health and travel insurance and how pioneering that work was, but how important that was to meet the customers' needs. It sounds like you've found your niche, but you've also been able to really use your skills to help customers in a way that they haven't been able to have that access to those products in the past.

**Michael Storozhev:** That's exactly right, Julia. And for me it was a great example that opened my eyes to how best to collaborate with the wider organization. As you mentioned, it was helping change legacy travel insurance products to provide coverage for mental health. And I'm not a psychiatrist or psychologist. I'm not a medical professional. So I could never really rely just on my expertise, no matter how much data I had and I thought we didn't really have that much pure mental health data.

So where I found the actuarial skillset could best contribute was by finding all the disparate sources of data, which in itself could have really solved the problem, but then merge it and overlay that with the expertise, the experience from those professionals that did understand mental health from a very, very detailed perspective that the doctors, the nurses, the psychiatrist that we had access to that worked with us.

And so through that collaboration, through collaboration with our claims team, we were able to understand how best to structure its products together.

**Julia Lessing:** You're right. I mean, we actuaries, we're not medical professionals, but to be able to do some of the things that you've been able to do, we have to communicate with non-actuaries and engage with people outside of our actuarial teams. And I'm looking

forward to asking you a little bit more about what that was like and how you did that a bit later in the interview.

But next, I just wanted to touch back on, you know, that transition from individual contributor to people later because it sounds like you were a very strong individual contributor. You are good at your technical work. What was the hardest part for you? You know, you knew why you wanted to become a people leader because you felt you could maximize more impact that way.

But what was the hardest part in making that transition?

**Michael Storozhev:** Yeah, it's a great question, Julia. And the most obvious one, of course, is adjusting to the new responsibilities. It often means a shift from the technical work to more managerial tasks or more communication. And this adjustment can be challenging and it requires a new skill set. And it required understanding what people management involves strategic planning and also decision making.

With myself, I love the technical side of my actuarial roles, the analytics, doing data science, pricing models, even Excel. I remember my wife walked into my office earlier this year at home and expressed amazement that I had this huge Excel file open. A screen full of numbers! Apparently, she hadn't seen that for a couple of years, apparently I hadn't touched Excel in some time.

But in a leadership role, I had to give up some of that fun to the team to let them develop in the same way that I had developed or even in a better way. And so being able to identify what you have to give up is a skill in itself. And that was probably the hardest bit for me.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, but stepping away from the technical side of things and that is hard when that's, you know, that's where you're so strong and you've got the experience and you know what you're doing to be able to step back and let someone else do that. That, as you say, is a skill in itself.

**Michael Storozhev:** It is. But if you do it right, it also gives you the ability to scale yourself. Instead of being too focused on the first round of the analysis, you've got a chance to then review it, understand how it also connects to other parts of what the team is doing and as a whole find a better solution. So that was the way that I forced myself into making that step, which I found really hard to give up.

**Julia Lessing:** So by focusing on the bigger picture of what you could then do, if you could step back from it, that was helpful in making that transition?

**Michael Storozhev:** Definitely. And it also meant that I was surprised with how others were able to try and solve the same challenges that I was going through previously, but in a different way. It helped me grow as well from a technical perspective.

**Julia Lessing:** And that was surprising?

**Michael Storozhev:** It was. I kind of expected it, but it's always a nice surprise and you're like, "Oh, that's a great way of thinking about it. I should have thought of that as well."

**Julia Lessing:** It's funny, isn't it, when we step into those manager roles and we think, "Oh, nobody else could possibly do it as well as we could". And then you step out and you step back and you put some trust in your team and they come up with something that you hadn't thought of or something better, and you're like, "Wow!". Yeah, very, very cool.

**Michael Storozhev:** It is, you know, from one side, an actuary moving into a manager role is quite difficult because it's a very different skill base. But at the same time, the actuarial profession is so strong that, you know, that almost all actuaries that you pass on a task to, if you give them the right frameworks, if you give them the right direction, they'll be able to excel with that task.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, that is a really good point, Michael. We are really lucky to have such a talented profession and you're right: with the right guidance they will usually do very well. So it does make our jobs a bit easier as we step into management roles.

I'm curious to know, Michael, how your view of the role of "leader" has changed now that you because sometimes, you know, before we become a leader ourselves, we've got some perception about what that will be and what leaders are meant to do.

But now that you've made that transition, how has your view changed of what the role of a leader is?

**Michael Storozhev:** I kind of feel sorry for my former managers, for former leaders, because I must have been a very difficult team member to manage at times. Stepping into a leadership role has significantly heightened my own self awareness particularly with respect to my own limitations. I've come to realise that it's almost impossible to accomplish every single goal that I set out for myself in this position or the stretch goals I want to achieve.

Yet that was exactly the yardstick in the past that I found that I expected of all my leaders. I expected a lot out of them! And I recall instances where I feel frustrated because then my manager or a leader in the organization didn't seem to pay full attention to what I wanted to do right then. I remember vividly the times and I vividly challenged my proposed solution, which I believe was the best, wasn't implemented or given the attention I hoped for.

But looking back, I understand why, as an individual contributor, you can wholly immerse yourself in a particular task, process, model. As a leader, on the other hand, you must balance the inputs requirements of many team members and scale for collective success. You just don't have the luxury of devoting a significant amount of time on just one particular issue. And making those decisions is difficult, but it's required of anyone in a leadership position.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, it's a different perspective, isn't it? So when you were a team member and then your work wouldn't be sort of moved forward, you'd feel frustrated that your manager wasn't doing that. But now you've realized that the leader's got kind of a whole lot of different issues, or plates spinning, and a whole different sort of perspective on what needs to be done or timelines. And it's a yeah, it's a different challenge.

**Michael Storozhev:** And when you flip it on its head as well, you know, when I was early in my career I would always be worried about not receiving recognition for some of my efforts. You do a piece of work as an analyst that goes up to your manager. They present it to the leadership team and maybe they'll mention your name, maybe they won't.

And you know, you always want to think, "Oh, was my work okay? Did they realise I did a great job?". They might have discussed it for like 2 minutes, but it might have been the most important thing to yourself as an analyst. Looking back on it, I could understand the balance required and more recently, through the lens of a leader, what I found makes me most excited is when I can help the collective team or specific team members being recognized and rewarded for their individual contribution.

The role of the leader, it might look as though it's just to take credit for what everyone does, but it's not. It's to advocate for the individual members of the team. It's to publicise their contribution and in my view, it's especially important for actuaries as leaders, because as actuaries we have a habit of being a bit quiet. We do a lot of work that goes under the radar.

So being able to recommend team members to be recognised, say, for monthly employee awards, or quarterly awards, and having the wider business recognise their contribution is really rewarding as a leader.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, and sounds like it's really important to you because as a team member that's what you wanted, that recognition, and you've then taken those learnings from being a team member into your role as a leader to ensure that you're doing the same for your team members as well, and you are recognizing them and giving them the credit for the hard work that they're putting in as individual contributors.

**Michael Storozhev:** Yeah

**Julia Lessing:** So okay, so we've talked about why you wanted to make the transition. We've talked about what was hard about making the transition and how you now have a different view on what the role of the leader is now that you've transitioned to a manager role. I want to go back to what we were talking about earlier around working with people outside the actuarial team because that can be one of the things that's really tricky as we move, you know, when we're an individual contributor, particularly in an actuarial team, we might only have to talk to other actuaries.

And we all generally speak the same language and it's usually quite easy for us to talk to each other. But as you step into a people management role and you talked about this too, Michael, in your role as you were building out the mental health clauses in the travel insurance. What was it like for you, or what have you found helpful when you've had to engage with people outside the actuarial team or outside more technical teams?

And you know, you're talking about the likes of doctors and nurses, but also even within an insurance company just working outside the actuarial team, what have you found helpful when you're engaging with those people who are not actuaries like us?

**Michael Storozhev:** Engaging with teams outside of actuarial teams, for me, it has to be relationships and perspectives and it always feels like a bit of a switch because we're so invested in our actuarial training and developing our skill base, being as productive as we can within our own teams, it's easier to miss the bigger picture. But once at least I found myself, once I saw the benefit of building out those relationships, understanding those different perspectives, you can't get back because you just see such a strong value.

And so when you think about perspectives, it's critical to understand that each department, whether it's marketing, operations, compliance, engineering, have their goals, concerns, ways of thinking that will be different to what you used to. So taking the time to learn about these different perspectives, which then helps communicate more effectively and build stronger working relationships with them.

You'll also note that just like in an actuarial team, everyone, as you mentioned, Julia, has their own language, you know? And as soon as you start picking up on some of that, you'll be able to contribute and collaborate with them more effectively.

**Julia Lessing:** As in, like understanding their language? Understanding the different terminology that other professions use?

**Michael Storozhev:** Exactly. So with marketing or digital marketing, when they say "GA", or Google Analytics, once you know what that means, you will get a lot of benefits out of it because you surprisingly find yourself with a wealth of customer behaviour data that you never knew existed. But when you just see the GA on a report you will just glaze over it.

So for me, it was about finding the time to have almost informal conversations, learning sessions, with different departments, with taking the time to say a coffee or a chance to understand the sort of problems that they're solving. Because a lot of the time they're very similar, just expressed in a slightly different way.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah. Using different words. So for you, it was about building relationships with people outside your team and starting to learn their lingo, you know, learning some of the terminology that they use and putting yourself in their shoes to kind of understand where they're coming from. But being able to communicate with them, using their terminology.

**Michael Storozhev:** Exactly. And you know how often we heard about actuaries sitting up in our ivory tower, it's a common criticism, but it's up to us as actuarial leaders to break that perception down. And for that we have to make the effort, the informal conversations, breaking down silos, having kind of a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect. Not pointing the finger and saying, "Oh, you know, the engineering team didn't understand our requirements".

It doesn't matter. We're all in it together, especially when it's a small organisation. Yeah, I remember people are more likely to go the extra mile for someone they know and appreciate as opposed to just an email.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, that's right. So building relationships. So if you were to give a tip to actuaries thinking about, okay, I'm going to build a relationship with someone outside my team, what would you suggest that they do? Where would you suggest that they start?

**Michael Storozhev:** You know, it's great that we're starting to be back in the office because my favourite strategy was the water cooler. And have a story about what you've been working on, kind of make it a little bit more interesting and make it relevant to other teams and get a chance to just have those informal conversations. You know, I recently had a chance to kind of start a new role and try to engage with new teams, build those relationships. But it's difficult when it's virtual. It's difficult when it's through emails. So for example, I've been with PassportCard now for just under two months, and last week I had the opportunity to go up to the head office in Israel and every single day was filled with conversations.

And you might look at a back-to-back diary and think that's going to be exhausting. But those initial conversations where you're sharing what you've been working on, when you've been sharing the problems, and the challenges you expect to encounter. But then realising how close that they can come together and how the collaboration can actually accelerate solutions is just mind boggling.

And I remember coming out of some of those meetings thinking, this is incredible. The energy and excitement was just keeping me up. And jet lag time, it's so easy to forget when you can have that. So I really love those informal conversations. We weren't kind of going in there to solve a particular problem, no agenda or anything, it was just a chance to chat, to understand where we're coming from. And a lot of times it takes a bit of time, takes a bit of effort. One coffee isn't enough. One impromptu conversation in the corridor isn't enough. But if you make the effort, if you take the opportunities that come into the office, sit down with someone, it's amazing what that personal touch can do.

**Julia Lessing:** Yeah, yeah. Nothing beats that face-to-face contact. I mean, yeah, it really was hard when we were all working remotely all the time, so yeah, great advice there. Catching up with people in person, not having an agenda necessarily, but just connecting and talking, maybe sharing a story about what you're doing. Great way to build relationships. And you're right, one coffee's not enough. It's something that takes time, isn't it? It just takes time.

Okay, so an interview with yourself would not be complete if we didn't touch on AI and ethics. Because I know that you write and talk about AI and ethics a lot. What's one thing that actuaries in particular need to be mindful of when it comes to AI and ethics? If you can narrow it down to one!

**Michael Storozhev:** It's a big topic. And amazingly, it's such a fast paced topic as well. Anything that I've talked about or technical that I've researched gets outdated so quickly. But the reason I enjoy it so much is because we as professionals, as actuaries, must embed responsibility and ethics into our roles. And by doing it practically, by doing it appropriately, it doesn't slow us down.

It doesn't create a roadblock or make things more difficult. Instead, if you do it right, it accelerates innovation and in my view, provides better customer outcomes. So that's how I approach it. We as actuaries, we use data more and more of it in all of our roles. It's just accelerating and when there's data, there is risk. And we as professionals, we quantify, we look at risk.

But that risk is also inherent in the data itself, whether it's privacy considerations, whether it's leakage breaches, but also how we use the data. So the bias that the data represents and without acknowledging it, we expose ourselves to greater risk. So we as actuaries, it's one of those areas where I'm really keen to ensure that we consider the ethical implications of using these emerging tools.

And I use the word 'tools' deliberately because they're an arrow in our quiver of ways that we can approach to solving the problem. But it's not going to be the only solution that we use. And in fact, we're seeing more and more AI being used to augment decision-making other than replace it. And that's where actuaries can help participate.

It's about helping with understanding the frameworks, the governance, the risks of using these models, the data. But it's exactly the sort of things that we're used to with any other model, just in a different way. And so that's where I feel we as actuaries should be playing and of course weighing up the social implications of anything AI related rather than being enticed by the shiny allure of some golden new hammer that everyone is talking about is always the mindset and the word of caution that we should have in the back of our mind.

**Julia Lessing:** Great advice and I love your analogy of an arrow in our quiver of tools. I think, you know, it is so easy to latch onto these new things that, as you say, bright and shiny and we think, oh, my gosh, this is going to replace us. This is going to be the way the future.

And in reality, it's all just one part, one part of the puzzle, and we need to just work out how to use it best and how it fits in with the other tools that we have available. And thinking about our common goal too and our ultimate outcome, which as you say is around, you know, what can we do for the customers? How do we ensure that our solutions are customer centric as well and ethical? So excellent. Some great advice there.

To wrap up, Michael, I'd really like to just hear from you having made that transition from individual contributor to a people leader, what's one tip that you'd share with actuaries who are stepping into their first management roles?

**Michael Storozhev:** One tip? It will be difficult, it will be different, but it will be worth it if you focus on what's really important. And that's the people around you. It's not about what you need to do to succeed, but what you can do to maximise the success of the entire team. So my biggest tip is to make sure that you're not alone in that journey.

If you're alone, then it's easy to forget the people around you. So if you've got maybe a more senior, trusted colleague or mentor, get a chance to share your experience. When I was stepping into more of a people management role one of the biggest bigger areas of value I found was getting a chance to share my experiences in a small group, or one-on-one with actuaries specifically on a similar journey and a similar stage as myself, because that was when I was able to embed some of my learnings, see the same challenge I was having from a different perspective, and help me accelerate the growth.

Hearing someone's different take on dealing with the same or similar situation was always the best way to cement that learning, iterate and over time become a better leader. And so honestly, Julia, I was incredibly excited to be part of the course that you ran because you gave us that opportunity. Those one on one groups with peers, I think were some of the most important aspects of that journey.

**Julia Lessing:** Thanks, Michael. It's been great to watch your evolution and your skill-building. And as you say, you know, we all learn from each other and it is really good to be able to share those experiences that helps to cement our skills and enrich our own experiences. And think about problems that we're facing maybe differently from different perspectives today.

So, yeah, some great advice there, Michael. Michael, thanks so much for sharing your reflections and your advice and wisdom with us today. I'm sure that your tips and insights will be very useful for a lot of actuaries listening. So thank you so much for your time.

**Michael Storozhev:** Thank you, Julia. It's always exciting to reflect because reflection then helps me grow as well.

**Julia Lessing:** Thanks, Michael.