



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 10: Stella Avramopoulos, CEO, Good Shepherd

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Interviewee: Stella Avramopoulos

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Stella Avramopoulos, CEO, Good Shepherd shares how she relentlessly drives innovation to disrupt systemic road blocks and how we can all find a golden thread in someone to start an authentic conversation to build a shared purpose.

Julienne [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help activate your leadership. Hi, I'm Julienne Price, Executive Manager of CommBank's Women in Focus and Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

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Rebekah [00:01:03] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and redefine the business landscape, I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell. And today's episode, we chat with an impactful leader driving social change. Stella Avramopoulos, CEO at Good Shepherd, is a hope holder, using her experience working at the coalface of disadvantage and her mindset of opportunity to disrupt deep, systemic roadblocks. Stella shares how she relentlessly drives innovation by engaging corporate, government and services to wrap an aligned solution around a person, and how we can all find a golden thread in someone to start an authentic conversation to build a shared purpose. Hi, Stella. I am really looking forward to our conversation today. Whereabouts, are you joining us from?

Stella [00:01:57] Hi, Rebekah, great to be here, I am here on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I just want to pay my respects to the elders past and present and emerging and that also means that I'm in rainy Melbourne.

Rebekah [00:02:12] Thank you for joining us on Leading Women, I always start by asking our guest to describe their leadership journey. Can you tell us from where you started to where you are now, some key points in your journey?

Stella [00:02:23] Wow, okay, and thank you for the invitation. I think any part of just leadership reflection and journey for me definitely begins with just knowing who you are and where you've actually come from and the kind of odyssey. And I use that intentionally because I'm a Greek chick. You know, I grew up in Reservoir. I was born in Koo Wee Rup. My parents migrated here and I owe a lot to them in terms of my journey, my foundations, and just always want to give thanks to their hard work. So, yes, my dad came here as a migrant with my grandparents. He's a tailor by training, and so he starts a fish and chip shop in Koo Wee Rup of course, and then did a whole range of other things. Just, you know, just so many migrants coming to this country do. They've got that kind of, you know, zeal and risk-taking and just want to make sure that they're creating a better life for their families. I couldn't speak English; actually, my parents and grandparents lived with us. They didn't obviously know and spoke English. I didn't go to Kinder because they didn't think that was a good place for children to be left at. And so I rocked up to primary school without a word of English, I really struggled in those early years, I've got to say. But I really worked hard at school, as soon as I could read, I

didn't stop reading and ended up being a really good student in my Year 10 placement in high school ended up being at a court in the Children's Court. My father, he sent me with a lawyer friend of his who he made suits for to the Children's Court for two weeks to do my Year 10 placement. And I sat in that courtroom with the psychiatrist and criminologist of that courtroom observing a girl from Reservoir, same age as me, who was sentenced to juvenile justice for a year. And I heard her story, and she had no family there. And it really hit me hard the first time I ever got exposed to just a whole other world and that, you know, that did change me. And I spoke to the criminologist, who gave the report around their job and he took me under his wing a bit for those two weeks, and I just became fascinated with just how people could and a girl of that age could end up being in the state that she was in. So I studied criminology at uni, didn't really kind of explain that well to my parents. I let them kind of think it was like law because I wouldn't get any arguments with that. And then at 23, I got a job in corrections. They gave me a whistle around my neck and sent me to prison to do my first parole assessment. And I spent seven years in corrections, actually. And the thing that fascinated me there, I guess every time I do an assessment, whether it's a pre-sentence report for court or a parole assessment, I was always quite curious as to what I'd always ask, you know, what could have changed for you and you wouldn't be here in the first place. And, you know, 99% of the time everyone would say if only someone had just worked with me earlier when I was younger, this didn't happen, you know, family issues so that early, early years, which really gave me the impetus to want to start working with young people much earlier on. And so then this job came up in an organisation called Kildonan and as the Youth and Family Services Team Leader and there was this sort of real systems approach, where I thought, God, I could be at the coalface in the community embedded in community. I could work with the young person within the context of their family. So I was really interested and intent as a caseworker to bring that multifaceted approach around a person for the change. I was a team leader, however, I was not a social worker and they didn't want a bar of me and I had to change this team. And so I undertook my MBA training around that and, you know, within a few years, I just kept saying yes to jobs in covering other managers' roles while they were on leave. And as I was doing the MBA and learning stuff, I finally got tapped on the shoulder to act up in the CEO role. I had never actually had any kind of aspiration about being a CEO. No one had really prepared me for that or even suggested that I could have that in my career journey. And there I was once again a little bit on the outer, a 36-year-old Greek chick, in one of Australia's oldest Anglo, not-for-profits, very reputable and they were absolutely lovely and it was a fantastic place to work and everyone was welcoming and I went to my first meeting at the synod and there I was, and there were 30, 40 other senior CEOs around the table. And I think the youngest person was probably 50 and they were all Anglo, mostly men. And I sat around the table with my CFO at the time. We went together and I remember ten minutes into the meeting they were directing all the questions to him because they thought he was the CEO. And I remember feeling this oh my god; I'm never going to make it. I'm never going to get any cred here. What on earth am I going to do? And I nearly left the job. I had an honest conversation with one of the board members and said, ah, I don't know, they are just never going to accept me here. And they quickly appointed him as a mentor to me. And, you know, for two years, there was that real kind of imposter thing, and I made sure every meeting I went to, I read and I studied and I was so prepared, it was ridiculous. When I look back on that, I think it was the greatest gift I ever got because I had just done so much training and learning for myself and just kind of set in a different space and could see things a little bit more objectively and not part of this group think mentality in my own sector, and that just gave me a bit of an edge, particularly around just doing things differently.

Rebekah [00:08:31] I hear so much innovation in the journey you've just described, even as a 23-year-old going into corrections, asking the question, what could have been done differently? What could have gone differently for you that's an innovative mindset, Stella. And I want to know now you've come a long way further in your career, how have you evolved that kind of inquisitive, innovative mindset into an approach or a framework that you use?

Stella [00:08:58] Well, I think the foundational aspects of that actually haven't changed. Innovation comes out of someone saying no or a crisis or not being able to have the resource skills to do what you have always been doing and there's some kind of barrier. And particularly in corrections where they're not voluntary clients, let's face it, they're statutory clients. They don't want a corrections officer or a parole officer. They get one. And so there's quite a lot of work involved in that engagement, but also trying to rehabilitate and try reintegrate children into school when I was working with young people and prisoners back into the community. You've got to look for ways that are almost kind of Trojan horse moments of being able to find ways that won't put up more barriers. And I guess it's certainly a mindset of accepting that that's an opportunity. There's an opportunity there to try something different. What spurs me on then and now, even

more so, I guess, is I in my 25 years, I think have just continued to see more ambulances at the bottom of the hill.

Rebekah [00:10:11] And that innovative mindset you talked about before and your approach, is there an example that comes to mind where you said that innovation comes from barriers or comes from people saying no or comes from crisis? Is there a time you could think of where you've had a crisis or someone say no and what did you do? What was your innovation? How did you approach it?

Stella [00:10:30] Yes, I remember that's one of the most clearest thing I remember because I was a five-month CEO brand new with my P plates on, it was 2008 over Christmas and came into 2009 with my plan for the year. And then the February 2009 bushfires hit my organisations. You know, we were half an hour, 40 minutes away from Kinglake, and we're asked to step in to the response at Kinglake. And I remember, you know, going there and being part of that community and what was just a major disaster and something we've never seen before in Australia. And at the time, our organisation had been asked to be the major case manager for these people. And so I remember sitting in houses with people, we were trying to engage and in community centres and these were not the normal people we were used to seeing as a community service organisation. These were physiotherapists, professors, lawyers, nurses who had never, ever before been in such dire trauma, stress, hardship, no housing and we were kind of running the same response that we were doing in case management. And then they said, well, no this, you know, I remember people say, well that's not going to work for me, why can't you see me at 6:00pm because I've got a job? And why can't someone come actually come with the bank person, they forced us to review how on earth we were working. And so it automatically we had to change the team. We had to change our current service model and put financial counselors at the tables in those evacuation centres with social workers. So when someone rocked up and said my house is burnt down and the financial counselor started talking and saying, okay, well, let's sort out the moratoriums and you know, your debts, et cetera. And then they said, and my wife has died. Well, then the social worker stepped in and so a whole new way of working literally came out of that event that was a very multidisciplinary team and a way of working with corporates and government and the sector, all at the same time. And like the pandemic, the bushfires and crisis like that are these moments where at that point the corporate customer and the community sector client are the one person. And so we share, we have these shared customer at the same time and our joint endeavour should be actually to stop them sliding down the cliff. And out of that came innovation, a new way of working, particularly with corporates.

Rebekah [00:13:12] Twenty-three years old, you are working in corrections as a parole officer and you need to engage people who don't want to be there. I know, as in business, engaging a team who has chosen to work in my team is hard enough but is there anything that you learnt about how to engage people at that time that you maybe you still use?

Stella [00:13:32] Yes and a lot of it is a little bit of humility too actually, I remember walking through the yard and as I was walking, someone called out to me by my name and, you know, one of the prisoners and I turned around and they walked up to me and I instantly recognised him. I thought, oh my God, we went to primary school together and he was, hi, Stella, how are you? What are you doing here? And I thought, what am I doing? I said, what am I doing, what are you doing here? And he said I'm in jail for armed robbery. And his life was not that much different, his upbringing, his background, his schooling, just this sort of sliding door moments of hardship that suddenly turns into disadvantage and poor decision-making and issues with family and it turned out his mum was experiencing family violence the whole time he was at school. And, you know, no one knew, and it just put him on a whole other trajectory. So there's a humility to hearing the stories and there are dark and light shades to people and not only do people don't want to work with you in a statutory climate, one of my very first parole assessments was with an elderly gentleman, who had been in jail for 20 something years for murder. And so I started the conversation with my sheet, my assessment form, and I said, okay, you've got a couple more months in here to plan. Where are you going to live and how exit is going to happen and he stopped me and he said, oh no, I don't want to leave. And I said, what do you mean, you don't want to leave? I'm not leaving. I want to stay here. I want to die here. I said, why do you want to die here? He said, you don't understand, I murdered my son-in-law who was abusing my daughter, but I murdered the father of my grandchildren. How on earth am I going to face them? I don't want to come out. Engaging him in a conversation around rehabilitation in the community, my form was going to do nothing for me, so I literally just put the clipboard away and that for me is the beginning of the engagement strategy. You've just got to find the golden thread in someone to connect in with what is actually driving them. There is

the dark stuff but and we can see that a lot easier but there are these things there that they have that are motivating them for the good stuff. So I had to find okay, what's your relationship with your daughter like? And let's just bring that out. And in our sector, we call that strength space work. But really, it's finding that golden nugget and something in someone that is genuine and authentic, and you start just a conversation around that and not in a manipulative way. They've got to see that you are genuine in caring for them and walking with them on that and saying if you can then build a shared purpose of what can work and what will work and it's relational. But at the same time, there are tactics behind that when you uncover what that is because then you've got to build building blocks and I guess that's where then the design work in the engagement happens because in that engagement, you need the opportunities are packed. You look at what the barriers are going to be and just work through them like a bit of a roadmap and a plan. But you know, the most important thing I've learnt is at the end of all of that, what you've got to keep there for people is that sense of hope and whether it's in an organisational context with staff and clients and customers, or whether it was with that corrections client of mine, you've got to be there to back the hope and the possibility that change is possible if we do ABCD. And that, I guess, you know, as a CEO, a big job I've got, is holding the hope torch.

Rebekah [00:17:13] When it comes to corporates, I know that you are awesome at engaging corporates and all sorts of different aspects of your career. But now with your work with Good Shepherd, can you tell us, like, is it the same approach looking for the golden thread or how do you approach engagement with corporates?

Stella [00:17:30] I approach it from a business case perspective and an impact and outcomes perspective. Corporate, government and community sector, everyone appreciates the cumulative patterns of inequality and disadvantage. And I think everyone is now appreciating that we need to be better organised and better aligned around that. You've just got to look at what happens when we don't do that. When I left corrections in 2002, I think there were about 2,000, 2,000 prisoners in that year. There's something like 8,000 now. When I started at Kildonan as a team lead in 2002, I remember in that year, it was a big deal because we hit double digits. There were 10,000 child protection notifications. When I left 15 years later, in 2017, there were 110,000 child protection notifications. We've had Royal Commissions that have shone the light on how the system does not work and there are no silver bullets. And so my kind of opening gambit to corporates is, guys, here's the deal for you. I'm never going to want to steal your customer. I don't want them because I'm not in the growth business. But I bet you want to keep your customer and you want them well and you want them happy and you want to engage them with respect and dignity, and you want to address things really early on. And we have this shared alignment around that and so we come together on that to actually create disruptive innovation upstream and not at the bottom of the hill because it's going to cost everybody more when hardship turns into more complex issues. And we need everyone in a cross-sector, multi-stakeholder coalition way to kind of really break that cycle. And that is the main bit of work that we are endeavouring to do here at Good Shepherd.

Rebekah [00:19:16] Well, that brings me nicely to talking about the Good Shepherd. For those of our listeners that aren't aware of what you do, can you describe the organisation and your mission?

Stella [00:19:25] Sure, a lot of people actually don't know, is Good Shepherd, is part of the oldest and largest networked women's organisation in the world. In fact, we're in 73 countries around the world and because of the work, 400 years old, our work in women and girls in slavery and trafficking has earned us consultative status at the UN. In Australia the focus of our work is around safety and resilience, which for us means family violence services, family services, children's services and the full gamut of all of that. It also means work and services and programmes regarding economic participation, financial well-being and hardship. Everything from no-interest loan schemes to financial counseling, financial coaching and capability work, importantly, we bring all of that into what we call systems change works. So we have research and policy advocacy work, we have financial inclusion action plans that we run with corporates around Australia to look at what is happening for their customers and look at the systemic issues that need to be affected. We know, particularly with COVID, we've had to completely review our service models and do things differently and particularly for women and their families because we know that they are impacted the most.

Rebekah [00:20:53] What, in particular, has changed for women and children since COVID?

Stella [00:20:57] The whole issue of equality inequity is still alive and true for women, and we've got to start looking at that and looking at what are the barriers and the structural levers that we've got to start really looking at to change that trajectory for women. And I think that's why equity, we talk about equity because we do need to create a bridge to equality. And for women, there are additional supports and focus areas that we need to build to them to kind of cross that river and get to the other side and have true equality. And I think that's the interface and one of the challenges we're facing is, you know, sometimes men thinking that they are now unequal because of the work and the focus on women and that's completely not true. We know the higher inequality in a country, the higher the index of social problems. The world knows this but we've got to build some bridges for true equality for women in particular. And some of that's, you know, childcare, social security payments, actually creating a social protection floor for them, pay gaps, all of that, so there are multiple areas that we need to look at and the fact that we haven't actually addressed family violence and that's a gendered issue.

Rebekah [00:22:15] One question I'd like to end on before we get to the Toolbox question is around what's next for Good Shepherd? Is there something you're excited about, a project that's that you're working on that you think could make a real difference?

Stella [00:22:26] Yes, we absolutely have taken the cross-sector coalitions to a whole other level, and that comes with a lot of history. Last year, CBA invested significantly in a programme called Financial Independence Hub, which is providing 10,000 women over the next few years, who are recovering from family violence with a financial coach for up to a year and access to a whole bunch of programmes. We did a deep dive on the issue of this new vulnerable cohort that COVID has presented. We've had over 40,000 financial conversations with people over the last 12 months, and we engage Roy Morgan on three different occasions to really bring forward for us what's actually going to happen because what we are seeing now is 4.7 million brand new vulnerable Australians, who've never accessed services like ours before, who are vulnerable because of COVID. And you know, I feel like it's deja vu of my corrections days of how are we going to stem the flow of this and not build more ambulances at the bottom of the hill? What are we waiting for? How many more crises do we need to see? What we're going to keep pushing for is keeping government and corporates on the table on this because it's a co-investment strategy. I'm not here to build any more charity models. Everyone's got to be part of the solution.

Rebekah [00:23:52] Wow, Stella, that is inspiring and I'm going to look up some of those projects and see if there's any way that I can get involved. And my final question Stella at Leading Women, we're committed to women's leadership. Is there a tool you can share with us for our Leadership Toolbox?

Stella [00:24:08] Well, I've been thinking about Toolbox concepts and cause I'm, you know, lead a women's organisation, I just want to change that, apologies to Leading Women, but I want to turn the Toolbox into a tapestry. It's something that is, you know, historically women's work. It's creative and innovative. And women are incredible in the ways that they can find different ways of getting through a solution because they've mostly faced barriers and been told no. So they've got to find new ways of working. A tapestry just call on you to know your craft, and there are technical skills required in that, it needs persistence and patience and that's really relevant because we're in a world that's going to require solutions that are interdependent and, you know, need to naturally fit and weave in with each other and there is complexity in that. And if there's one thing and you're not going to let me have a tapestry and there is only a Toolbox or a handbag, then I would like to leave everyone with the notion of having a golden thread. Put that in your wallet, put that in your Toolbox because you've got to find, it's hard to find that golden thread. And it should be because it's special and it glistens. And when you find it, it's amazing. But you've got to constantly remind that in all that darkness in, there is this little glimmer of hope and strength that we use for ourselves as women, but also for those that we're working with.

Rebekah [00:25:36] Thank you, that's a lovely note to leave us on. Thank you so much for your insights today, Stella. And thank you for all the work you're doing, and we are all so lucky that you got that placement in Year 10 that led you to the career path that you went on. So thanks again for your time and insights.

Stella [00:25:52] Thank you.

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