



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 1: Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, Co-founders of Agenda Media

Hosted by: Shivani Gopal
Interviewee: Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, Co-founders of Agenda Media on early career uncertainty to tapping into their purpose and finding their flow, how ambition and drive got their foot in the door while collective empowered realism and entrepreneurial spirit propelled their growth and impact.

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.

Shivani [00:00:33] Welcome to Leading Women, where we support your leadership journey. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode is a purpose-fuelled conversation with two formidable co-founders at the helm of a 100% women-owned independent media company with a clear agenda. Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, co-founders of Agenda Media, publisher of Women's Agenda, are a dynamic duo delivering a difference in independent media through a diverse lens. You'll love hearing their journey from early career anxiety to tapping into their purpose and finding their flow. Angela and Tarla share how ambition and drive got their foot in the door while collective empowered realism and entrepreneurial spirit propelled their growth and impact. Enjoy as they infuse the power of partnership for support, success and sustainable leadership. Welcome to Leading Women, Angela and Tarla, it's great to have you here, Angela, we're here together in person in our studio on Gadigal land.

Angela [00:01:46] Hi, Shivani, great to be here.

Shivani [00:01:47] And it is so great to be spending this time with you. Tarla, we've got you looping in remotely. Where are you joining us from?

Tarla [00:01:55] Hi, Shivani, so great to be on the podcast, thanks for having me. I'm coming to you from Bundjalung country, which is up on the Northern Rivers. So I live in a sleepy little town called Pottsville.

Shivani [00:02:07] I love that you call it a sleepy little town, and yet you get so much done, much of which we will find out very, very soon. Tarla, you actually made remote work and working from home commonplace before it very much became that way. And we'll be hearing all about those insights and more very soon. But first, Angela, let's start with you. Your career is a heady mix of media and entrepreneurial business, which is quite unusual. Can you share with us what sparked your leadership journey and path here?

Angela [00:02:40] I might just start by saying I can tell you why it is unusual, because it's not the first place you think to go and make money as an entrepreneur going into media, especially the type of media that we are doing but in terms of how I got here, I never anticipated or wanted particularly to be an entrepreneur. It wasn't really something that we thought about at school, at least in my generation. It was always the idea that you'd try and work hard and get a good mark and try and be something, be a professional, whatever it is. In my case, I did want to be a journalist and I didn't do particularly well at school until I decided that I wanted to be a journalist. And from then on it was like, okay, well, it's really hard to get into the course that I want to get into, so I may have to actually start taking this seriously, which I did with just enough time, it turns out.

And it turns out that would be a running theme in my life when it comes to deadlines, always with maybe not just enough time, but always getting in there in the nick of time so a great way to be a journalist. So I had always been interested in current affairs and news, particularly international relations, and I wanted to get involved. I wanted to be that kind of writer. And I saw that, I saw opportunities also, particularly to bring the human into that sort of journalism. And I remember a key piece that I read in Time magazine about the Columbine massacre and how the journalists had written this really interesting analysis, and I might say painful and emotional analysis of some of the people, the young girls, who are young teenage girls who were killed that day. And I remember reading that story and I was of that age and I looked at that and I thought, okay, that's happening over there in another country. But this journalist has really brought it home to me and brought it to life to me by bringing out that human interest in there. So that's where that background came from a little bit, quickly to the entrepreneurial side, because I definitely want to bring Tarla into this conversation as well. But I started Women's Agenda as the founding editor with a bigger publisher called Private Media in Melbourne. We did that for a couple of years and then when I went on parental leave with my second child, three weeks into having a three week old, I might say I got the opportunity to do a management buyout of the publication from the then publisher. And I really I just kind of had a bit of a brief discussion with my partner. We sort of figured out the details and then three weeks later, I was the proud owner of a media business that I needed to keep running somehow for the next six months. And it turns out that I already had the perfect person in my corner.

Shivani [00:05:14] You know, Angela, one of the many things that I love about you is your very humble and real take on leadership. And this is what our audience will have so much of the joy of listening to. There are some great insights in what you said earlier, and one of them struck to me, the power of purpose. You know, you said, look, you sort of haphazardly, just working through school, weren't really doing all that great and then all of a sudden you realised, hang on a second, there is something that I've got my eyes set on. I want to be a journalist. And then all of a sudden, boom, that sense of purpose just drove you forward. Do you find that still has an impact on your leadership and your entrepreneurial journey today?

Angela [00:05:58] Purpose is everything, and I wish I understood that in school. And it's the one thing that I really try to do well, I hope that I'll try to, you know, get my kids involved in later on because I just think we do often get into the education system and later on into higher education and other things without ever knowing necessarily the purpose of why we are there.

Shivani [00:06:18] There's one more thing and as you've said, Angela, I, of course, want to bring Tarla on this conversation, we've got so much to chat about. There's one more thing I wanted to tease out. And you said, you know, it's not commonplace that you would think about media and making money. And yet here you are, two formidable women leading the charge in women's media. And we often hear contradictory statements, you know, you hear about massive media companies making huge margins and becoming consolidated conglomerates. What impact do you think it has for other aspiring journalists and other aspiring entrepreneurs to see women leadership in media now and actually making some money?

Angela [00:07:02] So Tarla and I, we don't have any outside investment, which has probably made it a little bit harder for ourselves. But then at the same time, we're able to proudly say that we are 100% female-owned and that we've seen our team, it's all happened very slowly and previously I felt a little bit of shame in that, I think. But now I think we do find a lot of pride in that, that we have grown slowly. We see a lot more women-led, news media businesses popping up. And so I don't know if we've inspired that. I don't think so necessarily. But I'd like to think that we've played a role in part of that landscape to be able to create a stronger media network, both Tarla and I are super passionate about independent media, and so whenever new things come up, we love to see it happening. We love to see how they're promoting new voices, particularly some really interesting and great businesses that are being led by younger women who are just saying, we're going to do media our own way, and they're doing really well with it, being really successful, getting stories out there, getting stories heard, and getting stories across to people, who may not have ever engaged in those stories otherwise.

Shivani [00:08:06] Because, of course, representation matters and by two women leading the charge, you always have that female lens or female gaze when it comes to the media. You say 'we' a lot because of course there are two parts to Agenda Media and Women's Agenda. And that, of course, is you, Tarla; there is so

much to know about your leadership journey. I'd love to start with what shaped you and that journey for you along the way.

Tarla [00:08:33] Yes, it's interesting, I mean, I guess I never in the same way that Angela says, you know we didn't necessarily seek to be entrepreneurs but I guess if I reflect on my childhood and the person that I am, I would say that I probably do have quite an entrepreneurial spirit. I was always, you know, coming up with random new little side hustles when I was a kid. And I think that's quite ingrained in the person I am and in my ambition. But ultimately, for me, I didn't have a really strong sense of exactly what I wanted to do out of school. I took a little while to find my feet at school, same as Angela, in Year 11 and 12, I really kind of knuckled down and had a bit more of a focus around the areas that I loved and I loved politics. I was always I guess I was just so politically engaged from a young point, and I grew up in a very political family. My dad worked for the government. My mum is a teacher in the public education system that was really kind of core to my values growing up. And so I knew I wanted to kind of do something in that space and I knew I was pretty good at writing. But essentially, you know, I went to uni and I didn't do a specialty degree, I did arts and then I came out of it and I just remember just having these kind of existential crises almost weekly for a few years, just didn't know where I was going. And I think it was pretty fortuitous in a way. I know that women aren't meant to say that they're lucky. But I do think that, you know, my circumstances were in part like driven by luck and also driven by, you know, driven by work, but also knowing the right people. And I kind of stumbled into a marketing job outside of uni, which was terrible. It was really, really awful. And I did that for three months. And then a friend of mine there who had kind of similar interests to me and, you know, was similarly ambitious, then went into a publisher and she started in media sales. And I remember she said to me, look, I can get you this job. And, you know, you're pretty well equipped for it. And I was like, you know, media sales doesn't really seem where I want to be, but I took it. And I think from that point on, I was working in media. It was such an important part of my career trajectory because once I had my foot in the door in media, I could use that ambition and I could use that drive and I could use that kind of obnoxious spirit, I might say, to kind of knock on doors and to be heard and to get a foot in the door in other ways, in terms of writing and just doing more interesting things in media. So I think that taking that very non-linear approach early in my career was actually a really important part of my journey. But then, yes, look; I ended up at Private Media in media sales again. I worked alongside Angela and was introduced to Women's Agenda as a 25 year old and I just loved it. There had never been, in my opinion, a publication that was doing what Women's Agenda was doing, and I thought it was just so clever and was really filling a necessary gap. But at the same time, I really also felt that there was a lot of room for it to evolve. And so Angela and I obviously formed a really good relationship from an early point of me working at Private Media, and we would collaborate and bounce ideas off each other. And then when she acquired the publication in 2016, you know, even though it was all a little bit kind of fragile, I didn't really know what was going on with my job at that point. But I really knew that I wanted Women's Agenda to continue, and I knew that it would under Angela, because that's the person Angela is. But at the same time, I really wanted to be a part of that too. So I basically hustled her until she said she'd let me continue with Women's Agenda.

Shivani [00:12:49] I love so much of the empowered realism and the messages that are coming through from what both of you were saying. But it's also this empowered realism in a sense of honesty, of saying, you know what, I really didn't have it made in high school and I really didn't have it made in university, and I had no idea what was going on. And I was having a weekly existential crisis. And then I landed on my feet but I think the importance of that lesson for so many young leaders, especially out there, is that we don't need to know our path entirely and we can figure it out as we go. What are some of your leadership lessons around that that you would like to impart to our listeners?

Tarla [00:13:32] I think that's a really important point for starters, you know, I think that young women especially and a lot of studies at the moment are pointing to this, that there's a lot of career anxiety for young women. You know, we're more educated; we're more ambitious than we've ever been before. But we also kind of are we get paralysed, you know, in this expectation that we should have it completely kind of laid out. And I think it's a really dangerous thing and a dangerous expectation that we keep kind of enforcing on young women, because the reality is that things aren't like that. And if I had known that when I was 19 and studying, I think, I would have done things quite differently, maybe more quickly. I wouldn't have had that anxiety in me to have it all mapped out. So I think that critically that is a really big lesson. For me, I think my greatest leadership lesson would be around just being naive, and that sounds weird, but ultimately I never felt overwhelmed by big tasks or big opportunities or being a bit obnoxious, not in an actually obnoxious way

because that will never get you anywhere, but just making sure that people knew you were there. For me, you know, that has led to me having some really amazing meetings. You know, as a 26-year-old starting in this business, I was meeting with some of the country's biggest CEOs. I was talking to people that were had had these amazing leadership journeys. I was also you know, if Angela and I talk about projects that we want to do, I don't feel that kind of sense of overwhelm even when they seem insurmountable because I look at what we can kind of tackle in a micro way and then roll it out. So I reckon that is such a critical lesson that, you know, has probably taken me a little while to realise, but I think that is just such a core part of why I am the way I am and where I've gotten to.

Shivani [00:15:41] And speaking of lessons, the both of you have actually brought on many of your childhood lessons and experiences into your leadership and entrepreneurial journeys.

Angela [00:15:52] So I think yes, because we talked about that idea of, you know, not really knowing necessarily about the path of entrepreneurship. Now I hope that's quite different for young women, but you certainly wouldn't think about entrepreneurship in media. I think back then it was very much if you want to go and be a journalist, you go and get a cadetship at the key publications at the time. And obviously there wasn't the digital media that we see now. So it's yes, then you look back on childhood and you actually I was always starting like little lemonade stands or whatever equivalent it was. I think I'd find fruit in the garden and then put it on a stand and attempt to sell it or go and cut flowers from various people and try to sell that as well. So you realise it was actually always there.

Shivani [00:16:32] So Angela, in mentioning purpose, what is your purpose centred around?

Angela [00:16:37] First of all, I really do think that purpose drives throughout your career. It will be your motivation. It will be your satisfaction. So for me, day-to-day, we run a media publication. I am a journalist and to this day I still see so much of that purpose, being around bringing those humans to the stories and ultimately bringing those stories to as many people as we can because I am obsessed with the news and I want more people to get across the news and to know what's going on and not be frightened or put off or something else by it, but to actually engage with it and make it a part of their lives. And you know, from the storytelling that we do, we like to really think about the power and the people behind them. We like to think about leadership and how it's working and what might be missing from that leadership as well, particularly when it comes to representation. So we can continuously call it out and really try to, you know, hold governments and hold big businesses and hold other people to account on some of the things that they're doing day-to-day and hopefully bring it in a way that can help others get across those issues. You know, outside of that, if I might go wider and bigger than this, and this is only something that I've kind of recently articulated or come across in the last couple of years would be around my personal mission, which is and I see this through Women's Agenda that we are pushing to achieve. It is trying to elevate the need for stronger leadership and representation on addressing some of the biggest challenges of our time, and especially climate change. I'm really, really passionate about climate action, and I really, really believe that if all this time we had a different make up of leadership I feel like we would be in a very different situation to what we are now.

Shivani [00:18:17] It's incredible, isn't it, how purpose-based leadership enables you to really activate into the causes that matter to you, not just for you, but for future generations to come and in your case, your beautiful children. I want to chat to you now about the importance and the value of finding your person, because I think we think about that so much as a best friend, as a partner, a husband or wife. But it's also so important to find your person in life and in business and sharing the perfect space to advocate for having a co-founder in Tarla. What has this meant for you and how valuable has it been to have your own partner in crime?

Angela [00:18:59] So I just wouldn't be where I am with the business if I didn't find that partner early on, which I fortunately did. Some people can do it alone that's fine not everybody has to have a co-founder. Some people can do it alone. I know that I'm not somebody who can do it alone. I know that I do, I want to have someone there with me and that's what I've been able to establish in having a co-founder. And it's not something you can enter into lightly because especially when it is, you know, this isn't a side hustle for us. This is our business. This is our income. This is something that our families depend on and that we have staff we need to get paid, all of that. So we do this together. And first of all, we're able to, you know, fill in the gaps

of skills where other skills might be missing. But also you just have that person to continuously bounce ideas off, to check in with, to say how you're feeling, to kind of go in and share ideas. But it is more than a friendship and it's kind of you're in every part of each other's lives. And I think that's important to know going into these relationships, especially, is that your financial situation is linked, your family situation is linked, you kind of end up knowing everything about each other and that's great when it works. But just knowing that we are like we are family and you know, so often, you know, work is so traditional, we kind of get taught that, you know, you put work in this box, you put family in this box and you put friendships over here, if you get time to have friendships. But things can mix up in between that which can cause problems. But if you get it right, it can be a really, really beautiful thing.

Shivani [00:20:37] As they say in TV, you are all up in each other's business by the sounds of things and all the time. And from what I know of you, Angela and Tarla, you both genuinely are the yin to each other's yang. Tarla, tell me more about that.

Tarla [00:20:53] Look, I mean, I think I kind of accidentally fell into maybe sales, as I said before. It was just not where I wanted to go. It was not what I thought I was. But I think that, you know, and every sales guru will tell you, but it's such a deeply embedded part of how you should be in business. So everyone should kind of have some knowledge around like the transaction of sales and how, why it is so critical to business success because it is not just about making money, it's about building relationships. It's about, you know, warmth and empathy and knowing exactly kind of, you know, where our partners want to go. And I think that's the stuff that I really enjoy. I really enjoy with Women's Agenda that it's not just, you know, a transactional sale. It's really thinking about what a partner's pain points are, you know, how they're trying to engage with a readership like ours and thinking that through so that strategy side of it is a really important part of our commercial footprint and where we go as a business, which Angela is also very involved in, I might add. I think that, you know, that's worked so far. But I will say for pretty much our entire team, none of us sit in an isolated box within the business and that goes for Angela, that goes for every single one of our colleagues. Even if they're journalists, they're often doing social media strategy or they're thinking about, you know, where we go with our next podcast, or they're being involved in the account management of partners. And I actually think for most successful businesses and particularly media businesses, it's really important for everyone to sit across everything, to never be siloed into a particular space because it's just not an effective way of working anymore.

Shivani [00:22:51] It really is a sign of the times, isn't it, Tarla because we do need to have diversified teams, but even as individuals, we need to have diversified skills. As you said, you will have a journalist who will do social media and so on and so forth. How do you cultivate a team culture to achieve that and find the right people to bring in?

Tarla [00:23:13] We have some amazing talent on our team that's the first thing I would note is that every single young woman that we work with is phenomenal and finding them again has been partly fortuitous, but it's also been quite deliberate from mine and Angela's point of view in terms of offering what we know we would have really wanted to be offered by an employer. So that means flexibility, that means outside opportunities, it means understanding exactly what they want as well and where they want to go in their careers and trying to cultivate that for them. And we never set out going, you know, we need someone to have this kind of CV. We need them to have these credentials from the outset. It's more about the person and having that initial conversation and seeing where their fire is and helping to curate that. But one thing I've learnt is just that as a business leader, it's okay that the rest of your team is often way better equipped for most things than you, or way more talented at things than you. And I think that's something that leaders get hung up on, as well as trying to be the best at making sure that everything is really authoritative that's never our approach. We want to understand exactly, you know, where our team thinks that we should go.

Shivani [00:24:41] I want to touch on this piece around business leaders who sometimes don't get things right. And I want to talk about, you know, bringing in teams. And you talked about the importance of seeing them as people and enabling flexible work. Angela, how do you think you should cultivate a team environment in today's world so that you do cater for team's overall human needs versus hardcore work, if you know what I mean?

Angela [00:25:08] So, the first thing is that the business needs to be family-friendly, Tarla and I are the only two in our team that have children. But we know that we need to make sure it's a family-friendly environment for everyone else as well, because family means different things to other people. It may mean around friendship. It may mean around caring for a grandparent or whatever it is so be family-friendly. Acknowledge that people have a family outside of work. It may not look like a stereotypical, you know, family with two young toddlers trying to navigate childcare and all that but it's still family. People have other stuff. They have a life going on outside of work. So maybe it goes back to hiring as well in terms of cultivating it in making sure that we are interviewing widely, that we're not relying on really strict criteria for what we're looking for. We're not looking for a set degree or a set university. I think in many cases, like we wouldn't even care like about the degree. So in terms of the nature of the work that we're doing, I think we're looking for a bit of fire and a bit of entrepreneurial spirit that really helps always that all-rounder kind of idea where you know that people can cross across different things and can go and learn and go and want to be the expert in this thing, even if we don't necessarily understand it, but go and take it on so we look for that. We try to find that when we are hiring people. And it does mean, you know, you might get a list of candidates and you might try and pull in some wildcards amongst that list that maybe you wouldn't have thought to interview. But you go and do it anyway, and maybe you'll find the ultimate diamond within that. We've also got a young team and I think like it's I mean, I hope that we can kind of leave everyone with the message about young women and what they can offer and that maybe they don't actually need to sit there for 10 years learning from you before they can go and have the autonomy to do their own thing. Maybe they actually already know just as much as you, maybe they can communicate in a better way than you can. And maybe they have some really great skills that can shine now. But ultimately, you've got to expect that when you get brilliant people, they're probably going to leave at some point and you can't look at it as like lost training or that you've lost that opportunity or whatever it is. You just think of that as part of the overall mission and the purpose of your business.

Shivani [00:27:17] That's such great practical advice, Tarla, you mentioned hiring people, who are often smarter and more capable than you. I couldn't agree more that it's a leader's great privilege to be in that position. And yet so many leaders will find themselves having personal hang-ups or a sense of imposter syndrome in doing so. What advice do you have for those leaders to step out of themselves and to find that kind of unbelievable talent?

Tarla [00:27:45] I think that's often what it comes down to, like that we're so sure of ourselves and our own abilities that we can't see outside of that. But I will say that I think for leaders who are learning, who are empathetic, who have a very human approach but maybe are just kind of finding their feet, it is so important to relinquish control. And as a control freak, you know, as I said, that's something that I've had to learn and it's something that I've really taken from Angela about how to cultivate that because inside a team and to make sure that they know how valuable you feel that they are and to kind of handball them big tasks and give them big responsibilities in the business and to know that they'll do that so well. So I think that's my advice is just your business is going to prosper in so many ways that you probably don't know if you're able to relinquish that control and get outside of yourself and trust in your team. And if you don't trust your team, then you shouldn't have your team, you know, go and get a better team.

Shivani [00:28:54] Relinquish control and trust in your team, sage advice and I think I'd like to continue on with this moment of advice. Angela at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership, and we know you're passionate about environment and business sustainability. So what tool focused on this would you like to share with us in the Leadership Toolbox?

Angela [00:29:17] I might share three quick tools. The third one will be out of left field, but the first to read the news. Know what's going on, I know it's hard, but read the news, know what's going on. The second one is attach yourself to a mission and use that mission to help determine your values, who you will and won't work with, the lines you will and won't cross, and for what purpose. The second, the left field one, the third rather is around physical health. So as a leader, if you want to do these things and have these big missions, you need to do what you can to try and maintain your physical health if you're lucky enough to have that physical health. So I would say to train so and I'll say training of exercise, because I think many of us have been conditioned to directly link exercise with body weight and trying to lose weight and things like that. But rather training is something different. It's about long-term goals. It's about supporting yourself physically for those goals. And that could be around your longevity. It could be around staying mentally sharp. It could be around just feeling good on a day-to-day basis. We cover health in Women's Agenda and one of the things

from doing quite an extensive health series last year, a really key takeaway that I took from that was the research that shows that women who do 20 minutes of moderate exercise a day and that can be walking do so much better later on in life than women don't do that. So it is about doing something small like that every day.

Shivani [00:30:41] It's a great mental orientation shift, isn't it? It's not about exercise. It's about training for sustainability so that you can achieve whatever your life goals are, especially if you do want to live a long and healthy life. Tarla, what tool would you like to share with us in the Leadership Toolbox that can help ignite women leaders?

Tarla [00:31:00] Sorry to steal yours, Angela but I really do think that finding your purpose is probably the most important thing that I can think of, you know, really think about what you want to do, where your values lie, and that will help to guide you. Don't get too as a young woman who's studying, don't get too kind of waylaid in thinking about the next step or career trajectory or, you know, the right internship to get into. Just think about where your values are and what is meaningful to you. And I think that will see you have a really, you know, fruitful career.

Shivani [00:31:39] To start with your purpose and to start with your values, it's a very Tarla-orientated shift on Simon Sinek's Start with the Why. I love it and it resonates with me so much. Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women today.

Angela [00:31:55] Thank you, Shivani.

Tarla [00:31:56] Thanks.

Julienne [00:31:58] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we can all activate and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at womeninfoocus.com.au and subscribe to leading women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review, spread the word and let's commit to keeping the conversation going at #leadingwomensaus

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