



**Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

Episode 5: Michele Adair, CEO, Housing Trust, Chair, Homes Tasmania and non-executive director

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Michele Adair, CEO, Housing Trust, Chair, Homes Tasmania and non-executive director on forging her purpose-led career through the grace of accidental life lessons, dedicating her work and life to advocating for housing as a human right.

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 [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, where we support your leadership journey. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal, and today's episode is an introspective conversation bound to spark your own confidence, courage and integrity. Michele Adair, CEO of Housing Trust, Chair and Non-executive Director, forged her purpose-led career through the grace of accidental life lessons. Experiencing the gut wrenching fear of being unable to provide a roof over her family's head, Michele has dedicated her work and life to advocating for housing as a human right. You'll love hearing her zigzag leadership journey, heartwarming stories of generational strength and advice on how to ignite leadership on all levels. This is a conversation that will have you reflecting on creating the kind of world that you want to live in. Michele Adair, welcome to Leading Women. It's great to have you here in studio on Gadigal Country. I know that you've got so many incredible leadership lessons to share with us today.

Michele [00:01:42] Thank you so much for having me. I'm really looking forward to the conversation.

Shivani [00:01:45] As am I, Michele, yours is quite the leadership journey and it's been infused with lived experience, commitment and tenacity. Can you share with us your humbling path to here?

Michele [00:01:57] Well, it's been really zigzagged, actually, and certainly not the kind of linear progression that many people have or the expectation even that we give young people now that they're leaving school, you know, you got to do this, then you got to do that. Mine's really been all over the place. I left school halfway through Year 12 here in Sydney and jumped across to the States and was an AFS exchange student for 12 months, came home, needed to be independent. There was no way in the world that I wanted to go to uni or study full-time. So I started work basically and then quite some years later, had two little kids, was wanting to return to the workforce and knew I probably needed a degree. I didn't have one that was going to make life pretty tough to get a job. So I started that path and then bang, crash, my husband decided that he didn't want to be married to me anymore after about ten years, left me and our kids. After a whole series of unexpected and just completely broadsided experience, I left the Blue Mountains where we had been living, came back to Sydney, had a job, but then lost that when the company went into receivership. And so I ticked all the boxes for being homeless with my kids. I was scratching around needing to get any sort of work that I could find to be able to try and put food on the table and make ends meet that led to part-time teaching where I could get my mum to look after the kids for me at night. Then I got introduced to some opportunities to take on consulting. I was at a point where I would just do anything pretty much to work, was consulting for nearly 20 years and then got to a point where I was able to go into full-time executive roles and that was always only going to be in a social justice environment. And so here I am as a CEO and a chair.

Shivani [00:03:57] My goodness, Michele, what an incredible journey, so many highs and lows there and the lows are such devastating lows. No doubt you had to draw on some real strength, some historical strength by the sounds of things to get you through all of those hard times, the homelessness and also the transformation from teaching into consulting to leadership and, you know, such incredible echelons of that. It makes me think that you are the epitome of an example of the value of lived experience in leadership. And I know from our previous discussions that that came from somewhere. I understand that your leadership followed in the footsteps of some formidable women as well, and a great supporter and your grandfather, too. Can you share with me, Michele, how intergenerational lived experience has shaped your life, developed your values and tested what is clearly your never-say-never will.

Michele [00:04:58] My mum was in the Air Force during the war, and like so many of her friends, her attitude was, quote, she wasn't going to let the boys have that adventure on their own. And so at 21, she decided that she wanted to join the Air Force. She needed her parents' permission. Of course, men didn't, but women did. She asked her parents. Her mother said no. Her father said absolutely. He was a World War One veteran, took her off down to the recruitment office, signed her up, and there began this incredible four years of independence and of working in fields that had historically never been available to women. Mum's roles were predominantly office-based, but there were women at the time that she lived and worked with that were mechanics and aircraft controllers and doing a whole range of jobs. So her expectation was always going to be that women can and will have opportunities available to them. You just follow your passions; follow your interests, do that. Her father, my grandfather, had been instrumental in that. He insisted that she complete her high school education. Now we're talking about, you know, the late 30s, early 40s. It was rare even for boys and men to finish an education at that stage, let alone for young women. He wouldn't let her leave school and so that pattern was there. On my father's side, my Granny Rick was a suffragette and was actually a contemporary of Pankhurst in London. We believe the family stories that she was actually arrested on more than one occasion. And so there has just been this history, the DNA in me just cannot walk past. I so wish I could at times. You know, it's kind of got me into a bit of bother, but I simply cannot walk past things that seem unfair or unjust and will not be limited by my gender or any of the other things that make me, me.

Shivani [00:07:09] There's definitely a linkage there. I think with that strong sense of social justice that plays out in your career now and some of those intergenerational links with your grandmother being a suffragette as well, I can imagine you drawing on that strength. But also probably drawing on that strength when you mentioned earlier you being in a position where you were absolutely blindsided with your husband leaving and having two pre-schoolers, I understand, to look after and then a home.

Michele [00:07:39] Absolutely, I often have reflected on the fact that although I was living in abject poverty, I was rich in the relationships that I had, in the optimism that I just grew up with, in the role models and the examples that I had around me. When you have absolutely nothing but you have the hope of experience, then you're in a position to be able to begin to either hold it together or to be able to make the change. You know, it's the coldness and the fear and the gut wrenching humility and shame and sense of failure as a parent, dad's experience it too, but also as a mum of not being able to keep that most fundamental roof over your kids heads is an appalling experience, and it does make you very humble. It does mean that you learn about compromise, and I'm just incredibly thankful for the experience and for the relationships that I had that helped get me through although that doesn't diminish the fear and the very cold, tear-filled, lonely nights.

Shivani [00:08:58] I can only imagine that you still sometimes have reflections of those times and those lessons. I want to stay on this topic of intergenerational leadership for just a second and talk about the next generation. What lessons do you teach your children from that experience?

Michele [00:09:15] I didn't mean to teach them, but as a single mum, my children understood while I was also self-employed, let alone when I took national executive roles. My children always knew what it meant for me to have deadlines to be working, to need to be able to say to them, I can't do that at this time or I can't be there. I have other commitments and it didn't ring true for me until, I don't remember which of them it was, I suspect it was my daughter, who's the younger one, you know, coming into my home office. Before they were trendy, I'm talking 25 years ago and saying, you know, Mum, I need you for something. Can you do this? Why aren't you here? Why aren't you doing this? And I think it would have been my son who was the older one, saying to her, leave her alone. Can't you see that she's got a deadline, she's working. And so by the time my

kids were in, you know, maybe Year 8, Year 9, they were both talking about having part-time jobs. They were both, they just grew up with an expectation that work was going to be a part of their life. They have fantastic work ethics. They followed their passions. They are doing amazing things, their way and their agendas and creating their lives. And so there was this amazing accidental life lesson around, you know, sometimes we have to make compromises. We all need to do that. I love Quentin Bryce's quote, women can have it all, just not all at the same time. And I think that's true. And we need to cut ourselves some slack and be conscious of that, but also find the opportunities and to continue to pursue those things that really do excite us and stir our hearts as well as our minds.

Shivani [00:11:06] Michele, through some of that early story that you were sharing around being rich amongst poverty, you inspired a little quote that I'd like to dedicate to you that's just come to mind, and richness is to have hope.

Michele [00:11:19] Thank you.

Shivani [00:11:19] And that really resonated with me as you were sharing that story. And you've clearly influenced your children to have an incredible work ethic and you set them up for incredible lives simply through your role modeling. I'd love to explore that art of influence in your life a little bit more because you know from the very coalface of government housing to governance, you have had a powerful, positive and human influence to create change as a change agent. How have you honed your incredible justice-fuelled and marketing-fuelled influence?

Michele [00:11:58] For me, it's always about the audience and the message. So in housing, it is not enough to ever only talk about the human need, which is extraordinary. We all know the stats. If there's one thing we don't need, it's another report talking about how broken the housing market in the housing system is. We don't need to hear how many more people are on social housing waiting lists, how many more older single women are sleeping in their cars, how many more kids you know, and families are in tents and caravan parks. We do not need any more of that data or any more research. We need leaders and policy makers to have the courage to step up and make change. So it's not enough to only talk about the social need and the imperative and that human right to a safe, secure, affordable, appropriate roof over your head. I'm very comfortable and have an expectation that I will also engage in conversations with economists, with market housing providers, with politicians, with small business people. We have across Australia now, people that are unable to attract staff. We've got aged care providers closing down, needing to put staff into residential aged care facilities so that they can have staff, so that they can keep their other services going. We cannot and must not demonise short stay accommodation or private landlords simply because they're taking advantage of their assets. We need to find the balance in those arguments and in those stories. So on short stay accommodation, there's no doubt that it has decimated the long-term permanent rental market in many parts of Australia. But those tourist and hospitality economies rely so where are the motels that were built in the 60s and 70s? Where are we getting more serviced apartments from? We need to be able to do that. And so my marketing background and the strategy longer-term view has meant that I am very comfortable engaging with very different people, very different stakeholders, all levels of government, private enterprise, social services, you name it. They are very comfortable conversations for me and I think we have an obligation when we're trying to package a message to first and foremost think about our audience and to adjust it accordingly. We should not only talk about the economics and the cost benefit, there's no doubt, again, the research has already tell us if we don't fix the housing market, we are going to have higher health bills. We are going to have poorer outcomes in education. We are going to have industries shrinking. But that's not enough, we must also talk about the human cost and the human right to have rich, fulfilling, engaged, wonderful experiences as we journey.

Shivani [00:15:02] Michele, it's wonderful to see and hear you articulate how comfortable you are challenging others because when you do so, you get incredible outcomes for humanity. I think though, there could be so many listeners out there who were feeling really uncomfortable having to be in a position of challenging others, whether that be their partner, whether that be their peers or even their leaders. And I understand that you started challenging and questioning very early on. There's an incredible story you shared with me earlier about you challenging your teacher, about the story that you were reading. What advice might you have to women listening around how they could get better, even in small practices of challenging something every day?

Michele [00:15:44] There's no doubt that challenging the status quo, which is what change is about and ultimately what leadership is about, there's no doubt that it's uncomfortable. You know, goodness, I've done media interviews and I've written reports and letters and engaged with a whole range of people at different times. And it's made me unpopular. We all want to be popular, and we all enjoy having more friends and more relationships. And yet the confidence and the integrity and hand on heart knowing have I had the courage, have I put everything I can into a particular circumstance. You know, when I lie down at night now in the relative comfort and security of my own home again, do I know that I have done everything I possibly can today to make a difference and that's the thing that energises and really keeps me going. For women and for men to be able to be comfortable doing that is ultimately about being reassured. It is uncomfortable to challenge others. I would suggest for most of us it is more uncomfortable not to, just because we haven't pushed the boundaries doesn't mean that we are not aware. It might be a team leader wanting to change a process internally that makes another team uncomfortable. You know, leadership happens, as we all know wonderfully from lots of texts, including Kristin Ferguson's latest work, Leadership happens at all levels. So it really is about thinking through what does this audience need? What are their messages? What are the things that I can do for them, when I think about most of my communication, most of the things that I'm trying to do, I always come back to that, you know, simple thing. What am I wanting somebody to think, feel, know or do as a consequence of this engagement of what we're trying to do? So thinking through how can I make my message less problematic, less challenging for my audience is the starting position. It's so easy and certainly I did it for decades, you know, young and energetic and probably a bit arrogant. And, you know, I'm ready to change the world and convinced that I knew how to do everything in life better, which is why some of my teachers and other family members were rightly a bit annoyed at me at times. Thankfully, some of those edges have been softened over the years, but not the passion. And so it is absolutely about courage and understanding that people are invested in the status quo because it gives them enjoyment and it's familiar and it's comfortable. And leadership is, can be an uncomfortable space.

Shivani [00:18:49] It's a really profound insight because, yes, leadership can be an uncomfortable space. You're often alone when you're leading out front as well, but so can be challenging others. But I think your insights around making the message comfortable for others, packaging it in a way so that you're actually focusing on the change on learning but still being driven by your profound passion is incredible. And I think it also touches on some other key passions of yours, passions that you and I both share quite keenly, Michele, and that is around inclusion very much so. We share two key drivers around that, around inclusion and disruption. And I'd love to know why these are your drivers for leadership North Stars.

Michele [00:19:36] It started again very young. I mean, I left school here in Sydney a couple of weeks before my HSC trials were due to start. I graduated from high school in America, as an AFS exchange student. I don't have an undergraduate degree, but I have two master's degrees. I was self-employed for a long time as a single mum. I happen to be 61 now and still breaking down ground and doing more different things with my life. I have not pursued a linear career. I am a woman that is still rare in too many boardrooms. I happen to be in love and living my life with a woman that is diverse and unusual again. I live with a chronic illness, which sometimes means I am disabled in a very narrow, limited sense to keep in perspective, you know, the challenges that so many other people face. But it's taught me that we're all diverse that's the thing that makes humanity so beautiful. Every one of us has a unique story. Every one of us has a right to be respected and heard and to be in environments whether they are personal relationships, careers, boardrooms, at work that celebrate and enrich and provide us with opportunities and the recognition that we all deserve. So I don't talk so much about diversity anymore. I talk about inclusion and about creating a space for everybody to be the best they can be and to celebrate the fact that that means cognitive diversity and better ideas and better solutions and new perspectives to look at things. Yes, it has better business outcomes and yes, better policy outcomes, but my goodness, it is also responsive and respectful of the richness of our communities and our organisations and our families and our teams.

Shivani [00:21:46] You know, your success journey doesn't need to be a linear path. As you were talking to me about your story around, you know, not having a graduate degree but doing your masters and, you know, all of these, you know, changes that reminded me almost of hopscotch. You know, you could jump your way through and if you can do it, why not? And I think it's very resonant of your zigzag journey to success. I know, Michele, you are so passionate about inclusion and you've talked a lot about that and shared with us your experience with illness and disability. What could we better do as leaders to be more inclusive of all sorts of diverse people, of colour, of ability, of gender?

Michele [00:22:28] Some of that I think has actually started with the benefit of strangely, perhaps as working from home with COVID, where we had this little window into each other's homes and lives because we had to juggle kids and school and working from home, and we had cameras set up in our kitchens and lounge rooms and all sorts of other places. So we got a bit of a window into who people are. And I think the truth and the reality of being whole people. I mean, when I started my career, I was literally told by a very large global corporate, who was still very successful to take up more individual sports because I was too much of a team player. And so, you know, being team-orientated was considered in the 80s and 90s counterproductive. You had to be individual. You had to be, you know, competitive at all costs. And we know now that vulnerability is critical for building trust. And we know that trust is one of the most fundamental tenants of positive, successful cultures and success and performance in its most complete sense. And so how we go about leading and being vulnerable, my team will tell you, I frequently walk into our exec meetings and say, I'm not sure what to do. What do you think? How are we going to tackle this? By making it okay for me as the CEO or as the chair, like, really overtly, genuinely okay to say, I'm not sure. How about? Can we try? What do you think? Then I am giving permission for all of the people around me to put up their hands and also seek input, seek ideas, and to overtly relish the opportunities for diverse voices and for diverse perspectives. I do think, you know, I'm a middle aged Anglo-Saxon woman now with an education, and I need to overtly check myself and I do that fairly regularly. Am I still living my values? Am I still practising what I preach? And am I still overtly and consciously and structurally making the sorts of decisions and creating the sorts of environments that I want to work in? You know, I was in a conversation with someone when I got my first CEO role some years ago and they said to me, oh, it must be great to be able to, you know, be in a position to call the shots. And I said, what matters to me is now I have the responsibility and the obligation and the opportunity to create the sort of work environment and the sort of organisation that I want to work in and that's a gift. And I'm really grateful for that opportunity every day.

Shivani [00:25:33] And you're creating the kind of world you want to live in. It's a great example of why we need more diverse leaders, more female leaders, who can role model vulnerability just in the way that you have. And I love how you keep checking in with yourself because the tide of life can really carry you away and then off you go with those motions, but you're constantly centering yourself back to your values, which is such incredible advice. But I do want to get one more piece of advice from you, Michele, before you leave is today because here in Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. What tool would you like to leave us with in the Leadership Toolbox to help women take their leadership to the next level?

Michele [00:26:14] Normally, I'm not much of a fan of self-help or leadership books, but there's an absolute cracker that I was given by a woman, who's an extraordinary mentor and governance expert, and it's called Leadership on the Line and the subtitle is Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change. And it's full of really fabulous tools and tips and techniques to help us when we're leading organisations, driving change, trying to create influence, to understand what pushback looks like, sometimes to be able to spot the knives that might be coming at your back, as well as ducking the swings that are coming from the front. And more importantly, to be able to guide through thinking about strategies to avoid being brought down and to avoid feeling so, you know, overtly taken aback by the challenges that we have or that we face in leading and to be able to not only stay the line and take courage and confidence in that, but to also be able to build strategies to keep moving forward and to do what we want and need to be able to do.

Shivani [00:27:27] Leadership is courage and social change can and does happen and sounds like it starts with you. Incredible advice, Michele Adair, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

Michele [00:27:39] It's a great pleasure. Thank you so much.

Julienne [00:27:41] 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 womenifocus.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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