



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

Episode 8: Tracey Spicer AM, Chair, NED, Journalist and Author

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Interviewee: Tracey Spicer AM**

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Tracey Spicer AM, Chair, NED, Journalist and Author on learning from the past and shifting into collective action, how machine learning is reinforcing gender bias and the opportunity to change our future landscape for good.

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 an enlightening conversation with a resilient leader, who evolved from journalist to feminist and beyond. Tracey Spicer AM is chair and non-executive director, multi-award winning journalist, author and global keynote speaker, whose professional expertise and generous approach to storytelling and sharing our collective voices will ignite your sense of expression. Tracey shares how we need to learn the lessons from the past and shift from the cult of the individual into collective action where we are stronger together. Her latest book will have you thinking about how machine learning is reinforcing gender bias while in real life we are striving towards equity and the opportunity to change our future landscape for good. So just a few nuggets in this episode include the power of being heard, matching passion with preparation and knowing that it's okay to step back in order to leap forward. Tracey, welcome to Leading Women. It is so wonderful to have the opportunity to speak with you. I am joining you from our usual studios here in Gadigal country. Where are you joining us from today?

Tracey [00:01:59] Oh, Shivani, it's such a joy to be talking to you today. I'm a huge fan of your work and I'm joining you from Cammeraygal on Sydney's beautiful northern beaches.

Shivani [00:02:10] What a beautiful place to be indeed and Tracey, we've got a lot to dive into to use the term beach and take it to a new level. Tracey, yours is an epic journey of resilience and leadership in some of the most challenging environments. Can you share with us your own story of your impactful path to here?

Tracey [00:02:31] Oh, that's very kind of you to say, look, I wanted to be a journalist from when I was 12 years old. I wanted to tell people's stories. I wanted to ask them questions. I've always been fascinated by the human condition. But as I went on in my career in the media, I saw more and more deeply the inequality that exists right across society in many and very different ways. And I thought, gosh, I could probably do a little bit more here rather than just tell stories. I could work as an advocate and an activist as well. So my career evolved really to becoming a bit more of a feminist as well as a journalist. I started by talking really publicly about maternity discrimination after losing my job, a couple of weeks after having my second child. Then I became a little bit obsessed with the beauty myth this expectation that women have to appear in a certain way in the workplace and society and the time and cost involved with that, that's not borne by men. After that, the MeToo movement really exploded with the hashtag in October 2017, and I did some investigative journalism work around that. I was contacted by more than 2,000 people sharing their stories as Tarana Burke, who founded the MeToo movement back in 2006, said, there's nothing more liberating than being able to tell your story. And in the last couple of years, I've been working on a different kind of path. I've just

written a book about bias in artificial intelligence so a really future focused look at where we're heading in the next years and decades.

Shivani [00:04:12] Speaking of decades, we could go so far back. It is so rare that you have clarity at the tender age of 12 of exactly what it is that you want to do, and then going from journalist to feminist and staying in very much both realms. I think let's try to condense this down to the essence of the last 15 years or so, because we could go very far back. You've lent your craft to campaigning, dedicating your career to advocating and well down right battling on behalf of women from leading the national MeToo movement, as you've just said, to calling out workplace discrimination and more. How did you personally experience the extraordinary pressure in this time, and what were your lessons that you can share with us as women leaders?

Tracey [00:04:57] You know what, my heart goes out to anyone who works in the advocacy space because I know there are a lot of people, predominantly women, who have dedicated their lives to this, women who work in crisis centres, for example, women who are lifelong in the not for profit space. And what I learnt from my relatively short experience in it is that you can't be strong for others if you're not strong for yourself. You really need to put up some kind of boundaries in order to protect yourself, to support others. The other thing I learned is that it's a really wide, broad and global movement, particularly, as you said in the last 50 years; it's been this last wave of feminism and activism. And, you know, if you're not feeling strong enough to be able to keep forging forward for whatever your area of passion is, if the pressure gets too much, rest assured that if you pull back, someone else will step into your place and keep fighting the good fight. Unfortunately, I learnt this the hard way when I put out a tweet asking for MeToo stories, particularly in the media and entertainment sector after the stories in the States in 2017. I honestly didn't realise what a lightning rod it would be that there were so many people who wanted to tell their stories, and I got back to as many of those more than 2,000 people as I could because I felt it was a privilege to bear witness to their stories, to be able to connect them with legal help, with counseling support, and if they wanted it with media connections to tell their stories publicly. But I went too far and I completely exhausted myself, I ended up being diagnosed with vicarious trauma and developing a major depressive disorder. So I pulled back from that work in 2018 for that reason, took a couple of years off from advocacy and activism, and now I'm back into it. So I want to assure anyone listening who wants to combine their work with advocacy, you can do it, but please promise me that you'll protect yourself because that can be incredibly difficult work.

Shivani [00:07:12] Tracey, we were talking about this earlier, and I love that quote that you've said around you can't be strong for others if you're not strong for yourself. And I think there's so much power in knowing that you've got a community behind you that you can take a step back because there are so many other people advocating that will also step forward. Did going through that pressurised environment give you some realisations around that?

Tracey [00:07:38] Oh, yes, it gave me a couple of realisations, particularly around how we need to learn the lessons of the past. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were a lot of consciousness raising, they used to call it, meetings of women in town halls, in houses, in pizza joints to support each other and share ideas and lift each other up. But there was also a stronger sense at that time of a sense of collective action, whereas now we're living at a time of the cult of the individual. So we need to remember that true sisterhood of back in the day, as well as joining with our allies, our male allies in particular, and realising that we are stronger together. I think there was also a realisation for me, and I'd love to share this with people listening, that you need tools, active tools to be able to put those barriers up around yourself. And whether that's debriefing with someone trusted, whether it's seeing a psychologist, whether it's getting into mindfulness meditation and yoga, which I've been into for 20, 30 years, but really went hard at it when I was experiencing these mental health issues. And they give you that protective layer, that barrier that you need to keep moving forward. So I guess in a way, in order to step forward, you've got to step back a little bit and go into yourself. There are phases in your life where you have to go outward to the world, and there are phases like a field where you have to go fallow and pull back and let yourself recover.

Shivani [00:09:13] Absolutely and it's about picking and choosing the battles that you've got the strength to fight so that you can give it your all and fight injustice in a way that you feel you are doing in a way that is justified. In fact, you have a lot of time and space and sage advice to offer on how other people can actually adapt storytelling in order to change, as you say, the hearts and minds of others.

Tracey [00:09:38] Storytelling is the most powerful tool that we all have in our toolkit. Everyone has a story to tell, and often, particularly as women, we feel that our story either doesn't deserve to be told or we don't feel we have the strength or the emotional resilience to be able to do that. And certainly you've got to make sure you're ready before you tell your story. But I can tell you here and now, everyone's story is equally as relevant, as valid, and can create earth-shattering change. We often get caught up on data and statistics and research, and of course, they're important to provide a base for structural change. But what changes hearts and minds, to use your words, Shiv, are stories, anecdote, metaphor, visualisations, showing people what's happened to you. And all of a sudden I think, oh gosh, that's happened to me too. And again, that was at the heart of the MeToo movement. Never underestimate the power of your own story that's burning inside you. And never underestimate the release that it feels, the burden that it lifts when you share that story, even if you just share it with yourself or your close loved one.

Shivani [00:10:56] It's interesting, isn't it, when you verbalise something that you're going through, you feel seen, especially heard, and as a result, incredibly validated and therefore valued as a human. As I hear you speak, though, Tracey, I'm starting to think about some of those women out there that may be thinking, I don't think I have the space that is created for me to start telling my story. I think that there may be awkwardness or I may not be invited to do so. How might a woman, who is in a workplace setting or even a family barbecue start to share her story when she's just not feeling emotionally or intellectually equipped to do so through practice?

Tracey [00:11:39] Oh, it's tricky, because first of all, you've got to feel that you deserve to tell your story and everyone deserves to tell their stories. I would suggest some kind of bystander training in this circumstance. If you have a story inside you that you want to tell in a private or a public space, find an ally in a barbecue situation; it can be a friend or family member. Say to them beforehand, look, I'm going to start this conversation. I'm going to tell my story. Can you ask me a question so I can rip the Band-Aid off and I'll answer it and can you support me while I'm doing that? And similarly, in a workplace circumstance, find some workplace allies, create a small group, see if someone else wants to share their story, and then you're sharing it in a safe space. Of course, prepare, do your research, check workplace policy, all of that stuff. But then if you tell your story, someone else will support you and you'll feel less alone.

Shivani [00:12:37] I want to talk about how we can look at the other side of this as well, Tracey, which is the importance of tooting your own horn and the importance of saying, hey, I've got this incredible leadership story that I want to share and I want to share and celebrate and be acknowledged for my wins. How might we do that in the workplace?

Tracey [00:12:54] I love this and at the age of 55, I was still struggling with it. I adored Jamila Rizvi's book, I can't remember the title. But she talked about how we self-sabotage by saying just and sorry, and I'll re-read emails before I send them and they're full of just and I have to go and delete all of that just. Are you the same?

Shivani [00:13:18] I am absolutely the same. I was just signaling me too to you because I do that. And in fact, I'll start writing out the email for my own comfort. I'll write just and then I'll go back and delete it and go, but I cannot do it to myself. I will not send that word.

Tracey [00:13:34] Oh, look, we all struggle with it and it's because of the way that we're brought up predominantly in broader society. I wrote a book about this, The Good Girl Syndrome. You know, we want to be the good girl. We want to be liked. We want to sit there and fetch the tea and scones and never talk about the nasty business of money, as we used to say back in the day. What I would say to other women who are struggling with this and what's helped me get past it is I actively think in my head what would a bloke do? And blokes generally, I've got a son and daughter, who are older teens now and I see it in my son already. He has no problem talking up his achievements. And look, I think that's a great thing in any human, so obviously I support it, but then I really reflect on myself and the women I see around me and how much they struggle with it and have to use self-talk. So one thing I teach women in presentation training is do the ten deep breaths before you go in for a pay rise. So you want to talk yourself up or you really need to toot your horn. Then have a mantra in your head that you deserve this, that you deserve to be heard, that your message will help people, that you've done the work and you have a right to be there because I think we all have such negative self-talk from our childhoods in various different ways. And if you replace those mantras just before

you go in to do something like this, it really helps enormously. And another thing I would say is don't just think about the fact it will help yourself. Of course it will help you, and that's a really great thing. But it will help other women because you're role modeling every time you open your mouth to say, I did this and I'm really proud of it.

Shivani [00:15:19] It's so true and we of course had a bit of a backstage conversation about the importance of role modeling because the more times that we women stand up, take our space and share our leadership stories, toot our horns, the more normalised it's going to be. It's not going to be a blokey thing anymore. No, it's going to be this woman is being her fully embraced self. I love your mantra and I might just share my own, which is I'm going to stand in all my glory.

Tracey [00:15:46] Oh, I love that so much.

Shivani [00:15:50] I feel like when I say that to myself, I am essentially training myself to say, don't play small. There's so much more that you can give in and you can indeed give it all. And speaking of giving it all, there is something else that you have been giving your all to for the last six years. In fact, your incredible new book, *Man-Made Coding the Future*. The book is essentially about artificial intelligence and machine learning with an eye on the future of the fight for equality. Tracey, what does this book mean to you?

Tracey [00:16:21] Oh, gosh, I got the idea for this book six or seven years ago when our son was 11, and he turned around to me one day and said, Mum, I want a robot slave. I said, what are you talking about, darling? And it turned out that he'd been watching against our better judgment, terrible parenting here, *South Park*. And he saw an episode where Cartman, who's a very naughty boy, got an Alexa and started ordering very appropriate things from the Alexa. And it was like a light bulb moment for me. It made me realise that our robot sisters cast in our images with our voices are being made to create those kind of servile roles that women used to be associated with in the past and that we had hoped we had moved away from. So I really went down the rabbit hole on this research for six or seven years. And what I found was extraordinary. The data sets that are used to inform these machine-learning models in artificial intelligence to build the robots that we use every day, the data sets are from the 1970s, '80s and '90s, predominantly. So every nurse is a she and every doctor is a he. So this real issue we struggle with workplace segregation when it comes to gender is being embedded in the next generation through the machines that will be running our futures. And with machine learning, the machines learn that every nurse should be a she that this is just the way it should be. They go down the rabbit hole. So we really need to deal with this now before it worsens. And of course, it's not only gender. I mean, I discovered an automated soap dispenser that only works for white hands. A Nigerian tech worker put his hands under it and it didn't work because it had only been tested on people from Silicon Valley with white hands. And certainly that's annoying and discriminatory when it comes to a soap dispenser. But think about this same technology being used in self-driving cars in the military sector and in health care, because then there's ageism. You might not get a ventilator if you're over 50 because computer says no. So as you can hear, my head is right in this book at the moment. Yes, it's called *Man-Made: How the Bias of the Past is Being Built into the Future*.

Shivani [00:18:48] It's an incredible read, Tracey. And it also goes to show that there is so much more at risk. We humans are working so hard to remove bias in language, in workplaces, in finance, and as you've just said, machine learning is actually learning to reinforce some of these gender barriers right back in.

Tracey [00:19:08] That's exactly right, a friend of mine tested chatGPT, which everyone's concerned about because it can write essays and books and teachers and lecturers are really concerned about it, but it's also got those embedded biases. She typed in tell me a story about a pilot and a teacher. And of course the pilot was male and the teacher was female, and she did this with all of these different professions and she said to chatGPT, are you biased? Oh, no, I'm not biased. But by the time she'd done this for an hour with different occupations, chatGPT actually came back and said, I do realise now I have some embedded biases. So that's one of the solutions, we have to play with this technology, work with it and try to fix it, because a lot of it is still in the trialing period, as well as getting more diversity working in the tech sector.

Shivani [00:20:01] So Tracey, you've written two books, the next one, I can't wait for everyone to rush out and read because it is indeed a must read. And as they say, we all have a book in us, but some of us are really

unaware about the process that we need to undertake in order to get there. How might women, ladies, who are listening to this podcast, undertake your process to get out their incredible leadership stories?

Tracey [00:20:26] Everyone has a book in them. I do believe in that adage. However, a cautionary note, writing a book is like having a baby again. Well, that's how I felt from my perspective. It is an enormous undertaking. It's not something you do to make money. It takes an awful lot of time. So what I would say is choose a topic that genuinely comes from your heart as well as your head, because you will be spending a lot of time by yourself at home, tied to the computer writing it. And if it's something that comes from your heart, that will be easy. If it's not, it will be like swimming through mud. The second thing I'd say is yes, approach the publishing companies with your idea with a one page, very simply explaining what you're trying to do. But you can also self-publish really easily and very successfully these days. The good thing about writing a book, particularly if you're in the business sector and in a leadership position, is it gives you a wonderful platform in order to do a lot more speaking work and that raises your profile. It raises the profile of your company, and then it becomes symbiotic and you sort of develop a love for this connection between writing and speaking and storytelling. So it is ripping fun, but it is a huge task to undertake and make sure you're choosing the right topic. The other thing I would say is never be afraid of writing or speaking in layperson's terms. Mark Twain once said to a colleague, I would have written you a shorter letter if I had the time. And what he means by that is it's really hard to make things concise and to make it understandable to the average person but it is the smartest way to write. A lot of us think, I'll want to put a lot of long words in then people think I'm smart. I'm talking about really complex ideas, but people won't get it. Make sure your messages are really simple. Take the complex and distil them to the absolute key nuggets of ideas and then share them with the world.

Shivani [00:22:34] I've heard this piece of advice around pretend that you are writing to one person, whether it's your best friend or your colleague, and you're just solving the problem. Is that something that you've done in your process of writing?

Tracey [00:22:49] Definitely and speaking, you know, whenever you're talking to a lens or speaking in front of a crowd or writing a book, visualise a trusted, non-judgmental friend and imagine you're communicating with them because that will give you the confidence to continue to share this information and it will also get you out of your work speak because when you're writing a book, you're writing it for a wider audience than your workplace. We all get stuck in using acronyms and cliches and you know, the kind of words that we use as shorthand around the office. A really good technique is to do ten deep breaths, visualise that trusted non-judgmental friend, and then write. The other thing I would say about writing is there's an old fashioned term about waiting for the muse, right? You've got to wait for the muse. Sometimes it'll strike you at 3:00 in the morning. I was told that by so many blokes, who are writers and as I got older I thought, you know what because they are not the ones generally who are caring for the children back in the day, they could get up at 3:00 in the morning and then write then sleep during the daytime. But we can't do that when we're multi-tasking with parenting and working. So you've got to force the muse. I always force the muse by going out for a 20-minute walk, maybe going for a paddle board, just doing something to clear the mind and then sit down and write. But you can do it in those snatched moments. You don't have to have a whole day or a whole week. Just write in those snatched moments after going for a little walk or doing some deep breathing and you'll be able to get your book together beautifully.

Shivani [00:24:32] I want to drill down on force the muse, because that is certainly a new term and I'm going to use it. I'm going to be adopting it. So thank you for sharing, Tracey and that is that for those of us who maybe don't want to write a book, I still think we experience what I would call every day writer's block. When you're just trying to write an email to a really important stakeholder or writing a report. How might we get over every day writer's block?

Tracey [00:24:59] Well what happens when we're stressed about an email we have to write is we go obviously from the beautiful rest and digest parasympathetic nervous system to the fight, flight or freeze sympathetic nervous system. There's a couple of ways you can snap yourself out of that really quickly. One is that deep breathing technique, believe it or not, and you'd have to do this when you're working from home or in your own office without anybody else around. You can snap yourself out of it by chanting or by singing because that helps your vagus nerve. Another way of snapping out of it is doing something physical. You can stand up, jump up and down like you're on a pogo stick. Shake your stress out of your fingers. One technique that we use as newsreaders is creative visualisation. When I've got a problem that I just can't get past it, I

visualise the problem that's in the past and then a windscreen wiper wipes the problem away and now I'm in the present. You can also use a visualisation of sweeping leaves a way that's a beautiful thing or a light switch going on and off. It's a little bit esoteric but it absolutely works.

Shivani [00:26:04] That was so many gems of useful tools, thank you, Tracey. And I'm going to ask you for a couple more to finish up, because as you know, here at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. What tool would you like to leave us in the leadership toolbox to take us to the next level?

Tracey [00:26:22] I'd like to leave you with this, standing up for yourself is like building up a muscle at the gym. The more that you do it, the stronger you become. And I think that's so true because once you start doing it, it's a little bit scary and you go into fight or flight or freeze. But the more you do it, it becomes a habit. And when it becomes a habit, it becomes your way of life. And then people watch you doing it as a leader and they start to do it and follow along your path. So it's a beautiful domino effect that doesn't only help you in the workplace, it helps everyone around you.

Shivani [00:27:04] Tracey, There have been so many gems in our time together today. In fact, just as you said that, I think I just sat up a little bit straighter and I'm looking at all of the takeaways that I've got writing, speaking and storytelling captures the hearts and minds. You can change entire countries, let alone your leadership story, and hold your own space and force the muse along with so much more. Tracey Spicer, thank you so much for joining us today at Leading Women.

Tracey [00:27:32] Shivani it's been an absolute joy. I could talk to you all day. You're a wonderful role model. Thank you for everything you do.

Julienne [00:27:39] 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](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)

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