



Leading Women podcast  
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 1: Cecily McGuckin on Building Leadership Confidence.

Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell  
Interviewee: Cecily McGuckin

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

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In this episode Cecily McGuckin talks about building leadership confidence through tough experiences. As the only female CEO in the steel manufacturing industry, she leads with integrity, gut instinct and a no-ego rule as the foundations for a successful culture.

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**Julienne** [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help you 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.

**Rebekah** [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women. I'm your host, Rebecca Campbell. And in today's episode, we'll talk about building leadership confidence through tough experiences. Cecily McGuckin is the CEO and Managing Director of Queensland Steel and Sheet, who was awarded CEO of the Year 2020 by Leadership HQ. As the only female CEO in the steel manufacturing industry Cec leads with integrity, gut instinct and a no-ego rule as the foundations for a successful culture. Welcome to Leading Women, Cec, thanks for dialing in today. Whereabouts are you coming to us from?

**Cecily** [00:01:15] Thanks, Rebecca, I am coming from Brisbane today.

**Rebekah** [00:01:18] Great to have you with us, so I had been reading all about you, Cec and I've been reading that you were awarded a really prestigious award of CEO of the Year by Leadership HQ. I first would love to hear about your leadership journey and anything that you think you do differently.

**Cecily** [00:01:34] For me, there are a lot of different aspects, I believe that I bring to the table. I kind of really focus on three key areas. I really focus on my gut instinct. I use that instinctively for a lot of things. I also have my emotional intelligence, which I think women have quite a strength in too. And I also ask a lot of questions. I don't see there's any questions being dumb. So when I got involved in the business, one of the things I started off very, very early is I ask questions of absolutely everyone and I got perspective from everyone. So I travelled the world, I saw steel mills, I travelled and saw all of our customers and I really spent time questioning all of my staffs so I understand every aspect of the business I was walking into. When it comes to emotional intelligence, again, I believe it's really important to be able to lead with your emotional intelligence because you need to be able to understand where different people are coming from. Everyone has different personalities and history, which they come from so really honing in on that to make sure I'm guiding with the actual with my gut, with my emotional intelligence and asking the right questions. I believe for me that's three aspects that have created really successful leadership for me in this business. And it's something that I always go back to every single time.

**Rebekah** [00:02:50] I'd like to give ever in the context of your business. So your dad started this business 35 years ago. Can you tell us a bit about him and starting the business and the business' journey?

**Cecily** [00:02:59] Our business, Queensland Steel and Sheet, started when I was eight years old. My father started with a business partner, who passed away quite early in its inception and he's been running it by himself that whole time. I got involved in 2008 and have been involved the business pretty much full-time since that time. In 2018, I became CEO. So we sell steel to the manufacturing industry.

**Rebekah** [00:03:25] I want to dig into the process of you becoming CEO and all the challenges that you faced in that process. But first, I want to ask, you had a background in finance, what was it that you think that you brought to the business in those early stages and have helped you grow it?

**Cecily** [00:03:39] I think it was probably one of the main keys to the success of the business, I believe, being a family business so many people come straight out of school, out of uni and go work for their family business. For me, I think the best benefit was I actually came from a corporate environment. So I was able to bring the governments, the corporate knowhow from that into our family business to be able to create a combination of that real level between a family business and the corporate requirements that every business needs. So I've been able to bring it in and look at it from different eyes from my father. I was able to bring in a lot of areas that we just didn't have. When I came involved, we didn't have contracts. We had half the staff had loans and there was just no real structure there. So what I was able to do was to be able to bring in all that knowhow from that experience of my own to the business to be able to give it structure and really that is what's kept us growing and evolving to what we are now.

**Rebekah** [00:04:41] So I can only imagine you coming in, you have got a finance and corporate background, and you are a young woman, who is the daughter of the business owner. What was the process of you then rising to become CEO? And was there, I imagine, particularly in the steel industry, there must have been some pushback.

**Cecily** [00:05:00] To say that is pretty much an understatement, so for me, I come from a typical 1970s family, right, so when my dad started the business, he started it and ran it and mum was never involved. So from a really young age, I was shown that women weren't in the steel industry and pretty much never were. So it was never an intention or idea in me from when I was growing from eight years old that I was ever going to be part of the business. So when I came out of university, I then did finance and I actually fell into retail construction, which is where I kind of loved and really that's an area that I still love today. I think that's where Dad got an inkling that maybe there's an alignment between retail construction and steel. He started looking at the transition period of where he was going to go with the business, he got a consultant involved. And they said, have you thought about your daughter? She might be able to bring something to table, so this was 20 years ago.

**Rebekah** [00:05:56] So when you joined the business, as you started rising through the ranks and it must have become clear quite quickly that your skills were really useful. What was the reaction from the other staff?

**Cecily** [00:06:07] I think it was really difficult because for us as a business, it is very, very male dominated. So then you bring in me, who my dad was a very, as I said, very typical 1970s. It's a generational thing. So things have changed obviously a lot over the years. So for me, when I came on board, we didn't have any females. My dad would jokingly say to every person when he was bringing

them on board that women don't work here and sure as hell, never will. And so there was actually, obviously from the leadership all the way through the business that women weren't really in the business. So for me, when I came on board, I had a couple of different areas that I had to really fight with. I had to fight with the fact that there wasn't any females. But I had to also come in with the fact that I was the owner's daughter. So there was two areas, which made it really difficult. And you're a family member so it's really kind of three you when you come to think of it, is she really entitled to come in to do that?

**Rebekah** [00:06:59] And how do people react?

**Cecily** [00:07:01] Really difficult, at first, some people were worse than others. So we had one person, who was management in the team and he kind of had the idea that he was going to be taking it over or really taking it over to that next level. When I came on board, he was really quite shocked and made things quite difficult at that time for me. I mean, obviously I was still very green at that stage and wanting to understand the business. He really put up a wall and didn't want to help, if anything, he tried to put up as many barriers as possible to kind of allow me to fail.

**Rebekah** [00:07:36] And I think we've all experienced that one; there'll be one person who really just is going to be a barrier and just doesn't want us there. How did you cope with it? How did you deal with that person?

**Cecily** [00:07:46] So it was something that I had to really learn how to do it in the most appropriate way. So one thing I really have taken on board from that is I try not to bring my emotions into it. So when we even are having a conversation, he may be getting quite argumentative. I try to stay calm. I try to really kind of focus on the facts and use those as my ammunition of sorts, instead of using my emotions. So really ensuring that I was kind of trying to be able to stay calm, take a breath, walk away from a situation, if I needed to re-address it after the fact that I got all the facts, was able to have a genuine conversation without bringing those emotions into it, which whoever you deal with is such an important factor.

**Rebekah** [00:08:31] And has that person, stayed on, now that you've become the CEO and grown the business?

**Cecily** [00:08:35] No, they are no longer with us and that's been a massive change for the business as a whole. I've really spent the last 12 years changing in regards to all the people who work for us, who weren't aligned with us anymore. So there were those changes and that's a massive change for the business, for not only my father stepping back as much as he was very dominating in a very male-dominated environment to bringing a female in that obviously had changes. So we had changed staff members, a few there are still some that are still here that have been here for a long time but they've really accepted me, which has been fantastic.

**Rebekah** [00:09:10] So I know that we've spoken about the culture of the business and how you knew that it needed to change as you became CEO and rose through the company, I know that it is male-dominated but why do you think it needed to change?

**Cecily** [00:09:21] Look, I think any business really needs to make sure that culture is at the forefront. I know it's a real buzzword at the moment, but for me, we started bringing it in pretty much straight away. Unless you have a collaborative approach and everyone feels like they've got skin in the game, you're never going to have your team working to capacity. It's just never going to work. How you achieve that comes in very, very different forms.

**Rebekah** [00:09:45] Just on the culture thing, you know, you've said that it was an authoritarian culture and you wanted it to become more modern. So by more modern, did you mean more collaborative?

**Cecily** [00:09:54] Yes, exactly, when my dad was running it, it was pretty much this is the way it goes. You don't question it and everyone just follow that lead. Now, again, generational change, all those things have come into play. What I also take is what I saw from my different leaders and the way that, that team was responding to that is also what I've taken away.

**Rebekah** [00:10:14] I'd love to hear more about that. You mentioned you've met other leaders and you saw how they were leading and the cultures of their businesses so what was it that you saw in their businesses and what was your vision for the culture you wanted?

**Cecily** [00:10:25] Yes, well, what I've actually done is I've spent a lot of time going, I pick and choose things that I really love and things that I can't stand and I don't want to do, but also faults that I've made on my own. So I go, okay, I have done this wrong, how can I make sure that I don't do that again? Or a leader that I had, who I absolutely thought was fantastic and grab bits of that. But I can't just carbon copy someone to me because I've got my own personality and my own way of doing it. So for me, I can pick and choose and go, what are those parts of those people that I've experienced myself? What we need to do is be able to encompass culture that works for our team holistically. Now that comes down to the right team members, recruiting correctly and giving support when I say collaborative that's also making sure that you actually spend the time and thank people for what they're doing, really listen, you can sit there and go, what's your opinion and actually really not take it on board, really listening to what people say because sometimes the greatest ideas come out of a random comment that someone's made. If they feel like they can come to talk to you about anything, some great things can happen.

**Rebekah** [00:11:28] So you wanted to change this culture and you had a vision for the culture that you wanted to create and you've just hit some of the things that you did but what are some kind of practical, what does it look like as you're shifting the culture, what are some of the big steps that you took to transform the culture in the organisation?

**Cecily** [00:11:45] I suppose one of the most important things that I did was really looked at staff members, who was bringing their most because obviously, if you've got people that are doing 100% and others who aren't, those people who are giving their all, well, why am I doing this? It's giving them accolades. It's making sure that those people feel like they've been heard and that their actual work they're putting in is being acknowledged. I do barbecues once a month. I give birthday leave to all of my staff. We give flu shots if they want it. I then tend to do random little things for people. You know, if someone's had a baby, we give gift baskets. You know, if someone's done well and above, I kind of give them a weekend away with their family. You know, it's all those things that you give back to people that it does not necessarily need to be monetary. Monetary sometimes that's what drives people, sometimes other people; it's just a thank you. Some other people just want to be left alone. So you have to then understand each individual. For my team, I understand we're their family, if they've got family, if they haven't got family, I'm really trying to understand that individual because people's personalities are different too and that's really important to understand.

**Rebekah** [00:12:54] Yes that's such a good point, I mean, I have a great mentor, who one of his key advice to me was to be an effective leader, you've got to show people that you care. And so it's like remembering people's birthdays and their children's names and that's just so important.

**Cecily** [00:13:08] We do a family day every year and the reason we do that is that because you spend so much time in your business, you want your family to come to business to see where you are. So, you know, we have the kids here, we do a jumping castle. There's an appreciation. Then I get to understand their wife or the partners so they can understand where these people are coming to work. The kids see it and it's a lovely experience that we go through every year.

**Rebekah** [00:13:30] Yes and if they feel like you care about them; they're going to work much harder.

**Cecily** [00:13:33] That's right.

**Rebekah** [00:13:34] Through this process of transforming the culture and taking over and growing the business, what have you learnt and what have you seen are your strengths?

**Cecily** [00:13:42] Look, I think you'll always keep on developing. I've changed so much from when I first started to what I am now. I think I have a lot more confidence in myself because I've gone through so many things that I've done wrong. And so I always go, what can I do that in a different way? But I also always put my hand up if I've done wrong so that my staff can follow, you know, and always be really open about errors. So for me, I've really spent a lot of time in developing my leadership in different ways that I can look at things differently, whether I go to a course or whether I go to a conference, Women in Focus, the conferences, events that have been fantastic and valuable as well. And so I spent a lot of time speaking to other leaders and so for me that's just so important to keep on looking at it and going, what can I do differently? What can I bring to it? What are some other little tidbits that I haven't done before that I can try?

**Rebekah** [00:14:32] You mentioned emotional intelligence at the beginning, as being a strength, where do you think that comes from?

**Cecily** [00:14:39] Look, I think it's a matter of just being a decent human being, to be honest. For me, it's really spending the time to really understand an individual. For you to be able to do that, it's not a matter just basing their skill base. It's their personality, as I said before, your emotional intelligence is also related to your gut so you can really tell when someone's off. You know, it's taking the time to go and address it with them, are you okay? Is there anything going on that's not part of the business that we need to help you with? Because if you've got someone that's got, they're going through a divorce, they've got some major family issues, if that's going on in the background and you're not aware of it, all you see is that one dimension that they're not doing their job, then you might let someone go who was actually quite a good employee. But all these other aspects are impacting it because that's not giving them a 100% chance to be able to focus. So then you had that conversation, do they need time off, do you need to give them some support in another way? All those kind of things that allow them to go, okay, well, I know, I can come to her to talk to her about those things. So emotional intelligence is literally coming down to spending the time to understand an individual and ensuring that you also bring new team members into your group that fit in your personality with your group of people that are there. If you bring someone in, I've got a bit of a no-ego rule in my business so I don't bring anyone that's got high ego and no B.S., basically.

**Rebekah** [00:16:01] I've always said that as well but I find it really hard when the recruitment process to work out whether they have an ego or not because everybody's on their best behavior. So how do you suss that out when you are recruiting as to whether someone is a good fit for your culture?

**Cecily** [00:16:14] Well, for me, in an interview, one of the things that I talk about most is what do you do in your spare time? Do you have family? What do you do with your family? And you really try to bring someone out of their shell so they're so prepared to talk about their skill base, this is what I've

done, this is where I've been. Let's take them out of that thought and actually just talk to them like they're a human being. You get a really good gauge and that's where your gut plays in, right. I always kind of go, there's just something that's not right. And then I walk away from that individual. I never recruit someone quickly. I always make sure that I feel like my gut is driving me, going, this person is the right fit. And I also do a six-month probation period. So then I've got that backed up, so basically, you can kind of three months, you can kind of fake it, six months, you really can't. So within that period of time, obviously, we have regular chats, so I have a monthly chat with that new person. I get gauge of what they're like, so for me that's a really big part of it, too.

**Rebekah [00:17:12]** So you were working with your dad inside the business looking to a succession plan, tell me about the moment where you decided together that you would be CEO and lead the business forward. How did you approach this together?

**Cecily [00:17:26]** So my dad and I sat down and we decided that it was time for him to kind of officially show them that he'd let it go. And so he said to me, okay, so let's tell everyone that you got this new title. And he said, so what I want to tell them is in case I die, they've got someone to pay their wages. And I just went, what, I went, no, that's not happening. Three weeks, it took us to agree that and I knew at that time my gut again was really kicking in going you can't let him say that. And it had to be based on the fact that I've just proved myself for the period of time I've been here. I had established myself that I deserve that position. I knew I'd earned it. So I fought him really hard for that. So when we then expressed that to the team, it was a matter of we're giving Cecily this role because she's earned it. So that was expressed not only within the team but that was spread throughout the industry. It wasn't based on the fact that it was and I do believe Dad was saying it because he was feeling like he still had to give them some justification that his daughter was the one that was running the team now. And he felt like there still had to be some kind of reason. The reason was because I earned it.

**Rebekah [00:18:44]** So Cec, when you're making these cultural changes, you mentioned that you had to let some people go that's one of the hardest things to do, you know, as a business leader, how did you navigate letting people go while still supporting your team and the culture of your team?

**Cecily [00:19:01]** I don't think it ever gets easier. It's something that I think you need to be able to look at really clearly. So for me, I made sure that I looked at all the facts. I made sure that I was making the right call for the business as a whole. So when I looked at letting someone go, I'm sure that it was for the business to keep on succeeding. Now, you know, it's really hard because you got these people's livelihoods you're looking at. So you want to make sure that you've done everything you can to be able to ensure that they can make the changes that you need them to make to be able to be on board. But if they don't and they decide that's not the same path they want to follow, which the business is going on that you have to be able to make a call that's right for the business. So when I do that, there is a process in which we go through. But when someone does eventually go, it is something that I really communicate with the rest of the team and give them information as to why we made a call to a degree as to why that has happened. And, you know, in some instances people were shocked. But in a lot of the cases, people understood the reasons why. And, you know, sometimes that was more glaringly obvious than other times. But again, no one likes to fire people. And it's a hard call but it's something that you have to do to make sure the business continues and thrives.

**Rebekah [00:20:20]** Something I'm also picking up from speaking to you is that you're a very clear communicator. So it sounds like you set very clear expectations of people. I always find that hard to do but I can imagine what it would be like working for you, you know exactly where you stand.

**Cecily** [00:20:32] But it is really hard but unless people understand it, you're never going to succeed and letting someone go is never going to be comfortable. And you kind of go, I am letting someone go and it's hard. You think this person is losing their livelihood. But when I turn that around, I go, if I don't let that person go, I'm then impacting the livelihood of everyone else that's still here. Do I want the business to succeed or am I going to let someone stay here just because it's an uncomfortable conversation?

**Rebekah** [00:21:00] I want to ask you about resilience because you must be incredibly resilient. As the only female CEO in the Australian steel industry, as a daughter becoming CEO transforming the culture, where do you think that resilience comes from?

**Cecily** [00:21:13] I think through a lot of mistakes, a lot of crying.

**Rebekah** [00:21:17] But you keep going.

**Cecily** [00:21:18] A lot of getting back up, you know, that's a big thing for me. These 12 years has been the hardest of my life, just down flat, I make it really open that it's been really, really hard. And it has been something that I've got three boys and I come home and I talk to them going, this day has been really, really bad. But if I don't show them that you get back up again, how can I prove it to myself that I can do it as well? If I look back to myself 12 years ago and think of all the things that I've accomplished to now, there is no way I would have thought I'd been able to do what I've been able to do and that creates not only resilience but over time it creates a confidence that I don't think I had when I first started. And that then creates for me; I have a confidence that I can lead because of all the things that we've been through.

**Rebekah** [00:22:07] Great that's great advice, you have confidence because of what you've been through. So just give us an update of where is the business up to now? You've been running it for how many years now?

**Cecily** [00:22:17] Oh, my gosh, well, I've been officially CEO for four but that transition and even the transition from my father stepping back to me taking over was really, really difficult. This was his baby. So I had to really kind of claw bits and pieces off him over that time. He's had to see something that he's built be changed, like all the core stuff is still very much there but all those changes that I've brought to the table have been really difficult. And it's allowed him over a period of time, he had to have confidence that he was letting it go to me and that I had the ability. So it has changed a lot in relation to, it's been a slow burn, you know, and it's not something that has happened overnight. When I first started there was so many things that I wanted to change but I was very overwhelmed with it. But what I did is I picked my battles. So every year I'd choose a project that I had to work on. This is my main project. There's always going to be fires I have to put out. But this is a project I want to achieve this year. And every single day, every single year I've gone, okay, let's get through this one, let's pick my next battle and I've had to do that and because also you've got to look at it from perspective of there is a transition from not only my father and I, there was a transition for the staff that work for us, so they've had to see all that and go through that and the changes but also, you know, on a lesser extent, customers, the traders, all that kind of stuff. So I've been very mindful that I'm going to bring all these changes on but I couldn't throw everything at the same time on them. But I also couldn't throw it all on me as well because you just get burnt out. So you have to pick each year for me was a bit of a what is this year going to look like?

**Rebekah** [00:23:57] Yes this project that's great advice because there's always so many things you could do, pick one thing and do it well. So we spoke before about the importance of making a list of

your accomplishments and what that's done for you to make that list. So I'd love to hear what making the list has done for you.

**Cecily** [00:24:13] It actually came about when I was speaking at a Women in Focus conference, actually, and I had to sit down and I had to basically talk about my story. So I sat down and started writing down all these things. And it was a process that I did every couple of days ago and there were so many tears coming, it was crazy because you went, oh my God, until you stop and look back on everything that you've actually done, you don't realise what you've actually been through. So it's something that I kind of do when I go on holidays at Christmas time with my kids now. I kind of write down all the kind of major accomplishments that I've done for that previous year and that just builds and builds over each year. And at a point now I kind of go, wow, what I've been able to achieve, I know I can do so much more because of what I've already been through.

**Rebekah** [00:25:05] It builds your confidence, right?

**Cecily** [00:25:06] It does and unless you do that, you're fighting and there's always going to be battles and there's always going to be things you're going to have to address and there's always going to be things that are going to be knocking your confidence. And I know we all talk about, you know, imposter syndrome and what that looks like for everyone. I know women particularly have it more than men. And for me, it's trying to soften that voice and create a much stronger voice to give me the courage to keep on going.

**Rebekah** [00:25:30] Tell us some of the things that are on the list.

**Cecily** [00:25:32] So for me now, I've created all the real structure and everything that needs the business. I've got an amazing team that just supports me 110%. What I'm now doing is trying to find the balance that's right for me, for my personal life and my family life. So what I started doing about 12 months ago is I created non-negotiables for me. So every school holiday I have a week off, every single one so that my kids have time with me. And so I've got non-negotiables and I never had those before. It was always, I've just got to get everything done and fit it all in. I've changed that now to be able to do that. So now it's a balance of letting things go that I don't have to do it all. So I put a PA on about 18 months ago, which I probably should have put on a lot earlier. And she's taking so much off me, giving more to my staff so that I'm not doing it 24/7 and keeping it up at night and weekends doing it. Dad was really difficult on letting that stuff go. I'm trying to create a balance so that I can let things go and make sure that I've got time with my family, for work and be able to have a clear time in my head to be able to think of both.

**Rebekah** [00:26:37] Well, that is a wonderful accomplishment. So at Leading Women we're committed to activating women's leadership. We ask all of our guests for a tool that emerging leaders can add to their toolbox. Can you share with us one tool that has impacted your leadership?

**Cecily** [00:26:53] Sure, mine is finding your tribe, so important. So that's kind of a couple of aspects, finding your tribe in regards to the right people that are working with you, finding your tribe in making sure you have the right consultants that understand your business and are really aligned with that. And finally and most important is finding your tribe of personal support that is outside the business. So for me, I have a group of women that we go out for dinner on a regular basis. They're all business owners. And for me that is one of the most critical things that has helped me grow my confidence, get some support, change my perspective on certain things that has been one of the most critical things I could say that you have to do. I went to conferences to find these women. I connected some of them on LinkedIn, you know, in all these different aspects, I get in and create, all these different women and they're all from different industries. They're not within manufacturing at all. And for me, I cannot



express how important that is for me to be able to be the woman I am today because of those supports.

**Rebekah** [00:27:59] Thank you so much that's great advice.

**Julienne** [00:28:02] 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 [womeninfocus.com.au](http://womeninfocus.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 keep the conversation going at [#leadingwomens](https://twitter.com/leadingwomens)

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