



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

**Episode 2: Kelly Taggart, CEO of Roses Only Group on Leading with Creativity and Intuition**

**Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell**  
**Interviewee: Kelly Taggart**

**Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus**

---

Kelly leads with creativity and intuition and uses data to back her decisions. With a burning desire to grow a business, Kelly boldly stepped beyond the finance role and into the CEO seat. In this episode, we talk about leading teams with a focus on results and outputs, the importance of a considered hiring process and onboarding experience, and how instilling an owner's mindset encourages the team to thrive.

---

**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** [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell and today's episode offers a rare insight into leading an iconic brand and a team of 300. Kelly Taggart, CEO of Roses Only leads with creativity and intuition and uses data to back her decisions. With a burning desire to grow a business, Kelly boldly stepped beyond the finance role and into the CEO seat. Today, we talk about leading teams with a focus on results and outputs, the importance of a considered hiring process and onboarding experience, and how instilling an owner's mindset encourages the team to thrive. Welcome to Leading Women, I am very excited about this conversation. I have long been a fan of Roses Only. Kelly, where are you joining us from today?

**Kelly** [00:01:28] Hey, Rebekah, I'm in Brisbane today. It's really great to be here.

**Rebekah** [00:01:32] Just as we start, I like to ask every guest at the beginning, can you give us a couple of minutes just describing your leadership journey?

**Kelly** [00:01:39] Sure, so I'm actually going to take you back to when I was in high school, I had a conversation with my dad that always stuck with me and he said, you never know who your next boss is and you never know who will end up working for you. I might even end up working for you one day. And I just remember that first spark got me thinking about I could be the leader for anyone, not just someone who was younger than me or less experienced than me for instance, so that was a big eye opener. And so I found myself working for a flower business at 23 and I'd been an accountant in a few different roles. And I was desperate to lead a team. I hadn't led a team yet. And so I found myself in this start-up flower company and I was the only accountant in the business so definitely not a leader at that point, but I soon was. So I started managing a finance team and I hired people for the first time. And soon enough I was also doing a different role as well as managing that team; I was actually managing the partnerships of all of our floral partners. So that was the first step beyond finance. And then I soon expanded into also running the contact centre and having that contact centre report into me. And so this was a bit of a challenge because I was working with a manager who had many years of contact centre experience and I had none. And so I got in there and I experienced it. I actually spent my Saturdays in there on the phones listening to phone calls. I took phone calls myself. I really wanted to experience what it was like to talk to our customers and see what our salespeople on the phone really experienced. And I did that in order to understand and help that manager lead their team.

And then my role expanded again and I became the COO. So at 30, I started reporting as COO and I had all of the teams reporting in to me then, so that was our finance team, contact centre, I.T., marketing and design. And a lot of those areas, obviously, I didn't have the formal discipline in so it was at that point where I discovered that I couldn't get in and do what I did in call centre by any means. And so I really had to do my fact base, understand the elements that drives the team's results, understand the people in the team. But ultimately, I didn't need to know in detail how they were doing it. I had to learn how to manage the results of those teams and understand the outcomes.

**Rebekah** [00:04:43] So, Kelly, it sounds like a real strength of yours early in your career that helped you build yourself into a manager was to really get in there and work alongside people and understand exactly what was going on by doing it yourself. And then there was a point where you realised that you were just running too big a business to be able to do this anymore. So tell me about that jump, so how did you know that that was the time to let go of being right in there in the nitty gritty?

**Kelly** [00:05:11] I think I had some really good mentors within the business. So two guys that were part of the founding team, they were the people that helped promote me into that role. They said to me quite clearly, Kelly, you will need to change the way that you are doing things in order to manage these teams. You can't be in detail in every single team. There's not enough hours in the day. And so I actively went about changing my tact to instead understand at a high level what it was that we were trying to achieve with each of those teams. For example, I go to the I.T. team. I'm not a coder. I can read a little bit of SQL that's about it and that's not going to get you very far. So it was about sitting down with our CTO and understanding what I wanted to get out of the I.T. team. So what sort of things that we wanted to do for our customer, what sort of things we needed to do for our operations team, how we wanted things to function and workshop with him how to get there. I didn't need to tell him what to write, what sort of code to write or review his code. He needed to listen to what problems or issues we were having in business and my idea around what something might look like and then workshop that with me so that we could collaborate together and come up with a solution that would be something that was produced in the right amount of time for us as well as being functional.

**Rebekah** [00:06:52] So we're going to come to culture and how you lead such a large team in a moment. But I just want to stick with your journey first. So you are with the business for around 12 years and then a year ago you were made CEO, so you worked your way up.

**Kelly** [00:07:05] Yes.

**Rebekah** [00:07:06] What was it about you that led the founding team to believe that you were the person to take over running the business?

**Kelly** [00:07:13] We've always operated together. So I've always been by the side of the previous CEO and have been his COO for six or seven years before that, he was the CEO that was remote from the rest of the team. So I've always run the teams in person. And I guess he saw what he needed to see to put me forward for that position. And then it was about us coming together to come up with the transition strategy. And it's something that I think it's a bit of a luxury these days. It's not very often that you get to spend 18 months together shouldering someone and then leading while they're shouldering you and then having me step forward as CEO formally while he's still strategy director and very much a mentor for me. So I think it's worked well within the team that we've been able to really focus on that succession planning, not just for me, but also for my senior leadership team and helping them to progress knowing that I was going to step up.

**Rebekah** [00:08:18] So I just want to stay on you for a second and what I know about you is that you are a creative person. I know at school you were very interested in fashion and art and then you went and studied accounting, which I have run businesses and I see myself as a creative person. And I wish I had that accounting, you know, finance knowledge, but also just rigour in terms of the way that you must be able to manage projects coming from that background. What is it that you think that having an accounting background has brought to you and the way that you run your business?

**Kelly** [00:08:49] I think having that background and just to go back, yes, I love a bit of fashion, love a bit of creativity, but I think having an accounting background has meant that I just have an innate understanding of

some of the numbers and the way to track things. And so whenever we do anything new, what we're looking for is, okay, here's a creative idea, this is what we want to test, but how are we going to measure it for success? So understanding when you start something, how you're going to measure it in the end game can influence the way that you roll it out in the first place.

**Rebekah** [00:09:30] Have you got an example of a time where you've had a project and then right from the outset you set in place measurable goals and how you managed it?

**Kelly** [00:09:38] Yes, I guess especially in the online space, if you've got a new way that you want to put customers through a payment funnel or you want to have customers coming to a specific landing page, understanding that you need to put that tracking in place before you start is really important, because if you're running something through and you're saying, okay, so this many people use that promotion code or whatever it is that you've run. But then you don't see how many people actually came to that landing page and went away because you didn't put the tracking in there that doesn't help you. And then you end up having to run that scenario all over again.

**Rebekah** [00:10:24] So when you decide to make a change to your product in some way, so send people through a different payment process, like you mentioned, would you have an idea at the beginning of what your target is and also how you're going to measure it?

**Kelly** [00:10:36] Yes, you'd always have an idea. And then the idea is that you would run that project to see what the actual result is. And, you know, that idea might come from instinct, for example and then the data proves whether your theory from your instinct was right or not. And then you iterate from there.

**Rebekah** [00:10:58] Let's go into that instinct versus data because I know that you've said that this is something that you've learnt in your career, particularly in the space of hiring. And I know that hiring people is, I've always found it to be the hardest thing, getting hiring right and then managing and motivating people. So maybe we'll start with hiring. How has the way that you've approached hiring changed from when you were a younger manager to now you're obviously still a young manager but a more experienced manager?

**Kelly** [00:11:28] Not as young manager, I think when I first started out, I didn't have a set process or a way to hire, I was winging it. And I guess that would fall back on instinct. I've always been very interested in hiring people for the right cultural fit. So asking this sort of questions that might tease out what people really want in a role. Are they interested in having culture and values at work, are they just looking to come in and work nine to five and then leave, or are they really invested in the brand? And that's something I probably just created along the way for myself but as the business grows, I can't be the only person hiring people that would be my only job if that was the case. And so along the way, I had to start teaching people how to hire. And everyone brings their own ways of doing this as well. And so recently, actually, we've done a thorough review of our hiring process and brought in some ways of asking questions and sort of situation-type questions to really understand what experiences people have had that are specifically asking for things that we're looking for.

**Rebekah** [00:12:58] Have you got one killer question, is there an example of a question that you find very illuminating in the hiring process?

**Kelly** [00:13:04] There's a series of them. I think one of the ones that I particularly like is around understanding how people might behave in an uncomfortable situation. So tell me about a situation where you've worked with someone that you didn't like and what did you do in that situation? And the answers that we've had over time have been interesting for that particular question. And it usually opens up for more questions but it's very interesting to see how people behave with that one.

**Rebekah** [00:13:34] So now you're managing a team who are hiring and following your processes. How big is the team now?

**Kelly** [00:13:40] We've got about 300 people nationally and so it's a lot bigger than we started when we had, I think it was around 10 people in our tiny little office in Brisbane.

**Rebekah** [00:13:52] 300 people on the team, I guess they all do a huge range of different things. You've built these processes for hiring. There's then the onboarding time, is there anything that you've learnt about how to onboard new team members that is really important that you could share?

**Kelly** [00:14:07] Yes, I think onboarding is just as important as hiring. So you've spent all this time hiring the right person, you've really got to onboard them into your culture and help them to understand the team and meet the team and feel as comfortable as possible quickly. So we actually have a pretty thorough onboarding process.

**Rebekah** [00:14:28] So what does it look like?

**Kelly** [00:14:29] So I guess for most people and this will depend on where you're working as well. So in Brisbane, where we have our headquarters, generally, people that are onboarded here will get to meet all of the teams that are in Brisbane and get to experience all of the teams for a period of time. So that includes spending a little bit of time in our contact centre so that you can listen to what our customers are asking for and what they're saying, spending a little bit of time in customer service, spending time with our marketing team and understanding what they do and even our I.T. team, our data team, and understanding really what's going on behind the scenes and how that might impact the role that you're stepping into and what we find is it really helps then when people have new ideas, which when you're fresh to a new business, you're always going to have the best ideas because you have fresh eyes. They can really reach out to the right teams and say, hey, I've got this idea and they've already met them. They feel comfortable enough to talk to them. I would always encourage people to do that and bring their ideas when they're stepping into a new business.

**Rebekah** [00:15:40] Another thing that I know that you guys do is when you came into the business early on, I think there were some cash flow issues, which might have been where this came from but you guys elected to give everyone some equity in the business. And I have tried as a business owner to try and encourage my team to all feel like they own the business and to come in with their ideas and with their passion, but a lot of people just want to have a job. Has giving people equity in the business helped and what impact has it had?

**Kelly** [00:16:10] Yes, it's definitely helped and this is very early on. Yes, we did have some cash flow issues, so when I started we had \$30,000 in the bank and a \$60,000 salary bill the following week. So I was thinking, well, I have a very short-lived role here. And so we would do cash flow management updates with the directors every day. We were in the process of raising money at that point so they were very good at raising money. And obviously we got through that, but it was a challenging time. We did want to offer shares to especially to the starting team that was with us at the very beginning because we probably weren't able to pay absolutely great market rates and when you're in a start up, you're often in a quite a dynamic team where you might be doing lots of different things that maybe you didn't sign up for in the beginning but we're all in it together and we're really pushing. We might have done a few more hours than your regular job, so we wanted to be able to reward people and help them to feel like they were really part of it. They were working to do that because they were part of that business. So, yes, I think that has helped incredibly in the way that we look at the business as owners. And it helps you to look at every dollar that you spend and look at it like it's your own. So, you know, it's not just about, oh, hey, guys, we need to buy some more chairs let's all buy those really fancy ones that are \$500 each. Most of the time, we'd be like, oh, let's just go down to Officeworks or Kmart and get the cheapest ones. They'll be right. So I think it really does impact the way that people think. And we still do talk about this 13 years on. We still encourage our staff to want to own part of the business and we try to provide as much opportunity for that as possible.

**Rebekah** [00:18:11] So it's March 2020, you have been beginning your transition into your role as CEO and the pandemic hits. So first of all, what did you think the pandemic was going to do to your business as the lockdowns were called?

**Kelly** [00:18:27] That's a big question, so March 2020, we really didn't know what was going to happen there. We weren't sure whether our customers would want to buy more or buy less. Would they stop paying for things because they wanted to hold onto their money or would they want to spend more because they were missing people that they couldn't visit anymore? And we were very happy to find that it was the latter of those two. And then straight after that, we had huge supply issues, the increased demand that the

flower industry had, there are a lot of growers in Australia and wholesalers that were very short supplied and so getting flowers and getting enough flowers for the customer demand was challenging.

**Rebekah** [00:19:22] And so I know early on as your demand started to grow, you actually went and sat in that customer service centre again. Can you tell us a bit about what you heard?

**Kelly** [00:19:32] It's quite beautiful to hear these sorts of things where you're hearing this is what she'd like to write on the card message. "Happy lockdown birthday." "I can't wait to see you again." "We miss you." "Hang in there." Those sorts of messages are just great to be a part of society. And I think society in general; it's really nice to see everyone come together like that. So that's been a really great part of this business in particular.

**Rebekah** [00:20:04] There must have been a challenge. Obviously, your demand is going crazy, you've got some supply issues, you've also got a team of 300 people out there, a lot who work face-to-face, getting flowers, delivering, how did you manage that?

**Kelly** [00:20:16] Yes, so back to the March 2020 timeframe, the first thing we did was roll out a really thorough policy around Covid and we were really careful to make sure that we communicated that properly to our teams, made sure that they heard how important they were to us, how important their health and safety was, and making sure that even things like separating our sites where we had multiple sites in the same city, for example, in Brisbane, our contact centre and our florist warehouse are separate. And so we instituted that, whichever one you worked at, that was your home base and that will be your home base for the entire period. So we didn't have people going from one base to another in case there was any sort of risk there with safety. So it was really important to us that people knew that. We had lots of regular updates, we had temperature checks straight away. We also said to our casual team that if they felt unwell and had to go into quarantine or isolation that we would still pay them part of their normal hours so that they were encouraged to do the right thing and not come in because they needed the pay, but to stay home and get better so it was for the better of the team.

**Rebekah** [00:21:44] Managing a team of 300 people through what has been a really challenging time, what is it that you are most proud of and what have you learnt?

**Kelly** [00:21:53] I think communication is everything. It's so important to communicate, communicate, communicate in so many different ways to make sure that everyone hears that message that you're trying to portray and do it with positivity. So, yes, we had challenges but we also all got to stay working and produce this beautiful product for people and help people send love to one another when they couldn't see each other. I think that's something to be proud of.

**Rebekah** [00:22:28] So, Kelly, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating leadership. Is there something you can share with our audience that's a tool to add to our Leadership Toolbox?

**Kelly** [00:22:39] Yes, Rebekah, I think in terms of a tool, I would say back yourself. You have to back yourself. You can get advice from so many different people, listen to it, take it on board but at the end of the day, it's your idea, it's your decision, just run with it.

**Rebekah** [00:22:57] Kelly, thank you so much for joining us today that was an inspiring and insightful conversation. I could feel my brain clicking as we were talking.

**Kelly** [00:23:06] Thanks so much, Rebekah. It's been a pleasure.

**Julienne** [00:23:09] 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](http://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 [#leadingwomenaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomenaus)

**Things you should know:** Guests featured in the podcast are speaking from their personal experiences only. As this podcast has been prepared without considering your objectives, financial situation or needs, you should, before acting on

the content consider its appropriateness to your circumstances. CommBank does not necessarily endorse the views of a particular individual or guarantee the accuracy of the information provided.