



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

Episode 4: Gill Minervini, Director, Vivid Sydney and Gill Minervini Creative on the importance of bringing stakeholders on the journey.

**Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell
Interviewee: Gill Minervini**

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Gill shares how she creates memories that last long after the lights go out, the importance of bringing stakeholders on the journey and her simple superpower that gets her through everything.

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.

Rebekah [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell. And today we shine the light on Gill Minervini, Festival Director at Vivid Sydney and Director of Gill Minervini Creative. We discuss how Gill creates memories that last long after the lights go out, the importance of bringing stakeholders on the journey and her simple superpower that gets her through everything. Gill, you have had an incredible career, 25 years curating events, now Festival Director of Vivid Sydney and they're not just any events, they're some of the most special events, I would say that I've been to many of them, Fireflight Festival in Melbourne, Adelaide Festival, Newtown Festival, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. How did you get into events and to where you are today?

Gill [00:01:30] It's an interesting question, and I'm asked it a lot because it's not a very obvious answer, I suppose. When I first went to uni and did my undergraduate degree, it was really to be an actor and a theatre director. So I did a bit of that and discovered that I'm a really terrible actor, but I really like directing. And so I worked in theatre for a number of years and moved to Sydney from Adelaide when I was about 25 and at about 26, a friend of mine said, Mardi Gras are looking for a festival director so keep in mind this was in the late 80s. So I said I've never been a festival director before and she said, oh, don't worry; I think you'll be great. I got an interview and that afternoon they offered me the job. So it was really my theatre experience, which back in those days, which is a long time ago, there was no events industry per se, there were no events courses. It wasn't sort of something that people grew up to want to be, if you know what I mean. But the skills in terms of being a theatre director or working in theatre are very, very similar, if not the same. So Mardi Gras was my first epic journey into events and what a journey that was. And I just got the bug from there and I got the bug for big free public events that hopefully change hearts and minds, which sounds a little bit corny, but I've never been somebody that was interested in doing events really of any other kind. So, yes, from Mardi Gras, it just rolled on from there and here I am.

Rebekah [00:03:00] The events that you've worked on are different. There's that x-factor, there's something that makes them stand apart from generic events that you go to and forget about.

Gill [00:03:09] Well, thank you.

Rebekah [00:03:10] What is it? Is there a secret sauce in events? What is it that makes an event something special?

Gill [00:03:15] I think it's a lot of things and I think some of them are very hard to describe, I think, there's a sense of when you walk into an event and in fact there's been theories written about this that you enter an unreal environment. You enter this environment where, you know, it's a sense of play. So you're creating, yeah, this unreal environment where people can go in and maybe do things and behave differently to the way that they normally would. So I think the first thing is being able to really tap into that sense of play in yourself to know how to deliver it to other people. I think that's a really important thing. I often say to people that I work with, if you don't like going to events or you don't like going to parties, then you're in the wrong job. You really have to like it. And you'd be amazed at how many people kind of come in and really don't like crowds or don't like people that much or whatever. So I think a really strong sense of fun is something that I try to impart. And I think that ability to capture all of the senses. So it's not only what you see or what you hear, it's what you smell, what you can feel, what you can touch. It's that sense of immersion, which is a very overused word in our industry now. But I think for a long time, immersion has been really important to me. So you really feel like you're part of something. You're not just a static audience member, you know, clapping at the right time. You're part of the experience. And I think when you're part of something, you have a sense of ownership of it and that creates a whole different environment. And I love the element of surprise. And I think that's what I've been quite successful in, is that you come to events that I do or my teams do and there'll always, well hopefully, be something that will catch you unawares or surprise you. And it could be a very small nuanced thing or it could be something really large. But I think all of those factors really combine to create experiences that you remember and you know that's what we're in the business of, creating memories.

Rebekah [00:05:11] I've been to many of your events and I'll often find myself thinking, who thought of that idea? Whose brain did this come from, this something incredibly creative and quite random thing that you remember forever, just like you said, it's creating memories. I want to know about your creative process. So are these things that you dream up on a walk or do you have a whole team?

Gill [00:05:36] It's a bit of both. Usually the overview, like the creative overview, will come from me in terms of this is the direction we're heading in, these are the kinds of experiences that I'd like us to be able to deliver, these are the kind of venues I'd like to work in, themes, those kind of things. Sometimes I have ideas for really small, you know, small components of that and then depending on the team itself but I'll share that vision, I guess, with the team. And then we work together to come up with ideas that fit within that theme that maybe expand it a bit more, that are surprising. But generally speaking, that first impetus for the idea will come from me and then it's a very collaborative process from there.

Rebekah [00:06:17] So in the collaborative process, there must be a lot of people coming up with these big out of the box ideas. How do you get people to think like that? I'm just thinking of others, who are listening, who are running businesses, and they want their teams to be more creative and to think out of the box.

Gill [00:06:32] It's a really good question. Thinking out of the box is one of those terms that I sort of argue with, because I think it's about your box and I think people go, I wish my team could think out of the box. I wish they could do this. I wish they could do that. But not everyone's box is the same. So I think it's about me thinking outside the box in terms of what I do is very different than if I was running a catering company or if I was, you know, running a bank or if I was doing something else. So I think it's about knowing what your parameters are, knowing what your audience, whether it's customers or an audience in my world, knowing what they're going to expect and then thinking outside of that. I think sometimes we get very hooked up on, oh; I've got to think out of the box. I've got to do something original. I've got to be the best, fastest, all of those sorts of things. But I think it's about looking at your area and looking at what's going to surprise people in your world and looking at what's out of your box, if that makes sense because I think sometimes thinking too big, I don't want to stop people from thinking big, but sometimes thinking too big can stop me from thinking at all. It can stop, you know and go, I'll never be able to do that or I'll never be able to do that. I think sometimes those baby steps and looking at your own environment and what's fresh and new in your environment is a really good start and that's sort of how we do it. But yes, I'm kind of known for those quirky ideas. And to be honest, I'm not quite sure where they came from. I really don't know. I was brought up in a pub with a very, very broad range of people around me and I, sort of sometimes blame mum and dad, you know, when all else fails, blame them. For the first 10, 12 years of my life, I lived in a hotel, so I think I was surrounded by lots of different kinds of people and lots of different experiences and thoughts and all of those sorts of things.

Rebekah [00:08:17] When you have these big ideas that people aren't expecting, you must then have to take them to stakeholders like the city councils or corporate partners. I'm curious as to how you do that and how you bring people on board. Is there an example where you and your team have come up with something that on paper might look crazy and you've managed to convince a stakeholder that it's actually genius?

Gill [00:08:39] There's lots of them and it's getting easier now. I think the more experienced you are, the easier it gets. But I think ownership is a really important one. I think kind of trying to get your stakeholders to feel a sense of ownership, like your team, to feel a sense of ownership, to share the vision, to sort of understand what it is that you're trying to achieve is probably the first step. And persistence is a really good, really good skill to have. Don't be put off by the knockbacks. Just keep going back. Try and find another angle. Try and find another way of presenting an idea. I was on the creative team when Dark Mofo in Hobart started, so I started working on that project about a year or more just before our first Dark Mofo. And I directed the Winter Feast, which is the big food and music component of that. And we had to convince Hobart City Council and state government, although they gave us money to do it, so that they obviously had some sort of faith in us, but that people would come from not just the mainland, but all over the world to an event in Hobart in the middle of winter, and particularly in my instance, in Winter Feast because half of the event is inside and half of it's outside that they would stay until 11 o'clock at night in the middle of winter.

Rebekah [00:09:55] How did they react? And how did you convince them?

Gill [00:09:57] It seems so basic when you talk about it. But we came up with ideas that kept people warm, that kept people engaged, that kept people fed with great food and beverages, with massive fires really honing in on those human needs. And as soon as we did that and sold the idea and, you know, it was a very different idea in those days and it's not that long ago, but now there's a lot of winter festivals and things like that. But going back to then, it was quite a new idea, and particularly for a place like Hobart. So we were very nervous and we broke all box office records and hotel bed night records in our first year. And then the rest is history. It's become such a successful event. The second year we did it, we decided to charge for the Winter Feast only really to try and manage the crowds was, you know, so successful and people stayed until, you know, we extended hours, we extended days, all of that sort of stuff. It just got bigger and bigger and bigger. And I think pulling Hobart City Council into the mix in terms of that really made a difference. They felt such pride and ownership in that event. And I think that goes across to an audience too. People from Hobart felt such pride and ownership of that event because it was showcasing their food, their beverages, their place. So I think instilling that sense of pride with your stakeholders, that sense of ownership and, you know, it only takes one person in a council or whatever to really kind of hook into an idea. And it's about finding that right person sometimes and getting them to do some of the legwork for you. But, yes, from Hobart to China, when we were selling Lunar New Year parade to the Chinese government, it's sort of, there's so many examples. But I think the same sort of pattern is true of that ownership, pride and involvement.

Rebekah [00:11:46] So I want to talk now about leadership to bring together thousands of people to run an event that must be incredibly hard and high pressure as well. What are some of the challenges of managing a large event like that?

Gill [00:12:00] I think it's one of the hardest things. I mean, every business, every business owner, I think, or every sort of director will always say getting the right staff at the right place at the right time to do the right things is often the hardest thing of all. And I think it's true. Yes, we become family very, very quickly. You have to and there's a huge element of trust in terms of events teams, because often we're dealing with tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people and their safety and all those sorts of things. So it's actually a very serious business, the art of putting on events. There's a real serious side to it. So I think, again, it's about really being able to share your vision very clearly with the team, giving them a sense of ownership with it, which is not always easy. Going back to your question before it's about allowing people to have ideas, but knowing how to delicately either not take them on or take them on, depending on how good they are, I guess, or how suitable they are. I think being very approachable, I try and be very approachable and a massive sense of humour really helps a lot. Yes, it's not easy. And you're dealing with everything from creatives to production to safety officers to caterers to all sorts of different workers. So I think clarity is really important, clarity of the brief, clarity of your vision, reliability, accessibility, those sorts of things. But I still find it challenging. I'd be a liar if I didn't. It is very challenging.

Rebekah [00:13:33] You mentioned before that everyone comes together and it's like a family. I think everyone would like their workplaces to feel like a family. Is there anything that you do to create that sense of family?

Gill [00:13:44] Families can be dysfunctional too, to create the sense of family, yes, I think, I try to get to know people a bit. I try to find some commonality with the team. Sometimes that's easier than others, depending on how big the team is. I really try and share what's going on. I'm not very good at keeping big secrets in terms of keeping things from the team. I really try to take them on that, that road with me in terms of what are our obstacles, who do we need to win over, who's being more difficult. And sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. But generally, I think people need to know what you're going through as a leader, because then they can relate that to themselves. I like to be social with my team and I think that works. I think those days are very challenging now, though, in terms of the way things have changed and how social you can be and where that begins and ends. Events are very high pressured though, so there's always, there is such a drinks after event culture or a drinks after work culture, which may or may not be politically correct anymore, but I find that that works really well. I think that sense of sharing and achievement after an event is finished or through a particularly difficult period or whatever tools down, have a drink, have a coffee, whatever it might be. But I think that's a really important element as well.

Rebekah [00:15:10] You're obviously incredible at managing and connecting with people, is there anything else that you would see as a superpower in terms of your leadership and the way that you're able to pull these events and all of these people together, must be able to multitask very well?

Gill [00:15:25] Yeah, I think to my detriment, I think women sometimes do multitask to their detriment in a way. But I think sometimes we collectively take on too much. I know I do. I can go, well, I can do that. So, the pile just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. But then I think at the end of the day, sometimes that gives you a much better engagement with the team and with the event itself. I think my superpower, if you could call it that, is my sense of humour. I really do. I think it just gets me through, gets me in trouble sometimes, but it gets me through, through most things. And if I can connect with people that way, it's often a great entrée into a really terrific relationship. The older and sort of slightly wiser I get, the more I realise that if I'm not having fun then the audience isn't either and the team isn't either. So it's about finding those ways, those pathways to being able to make it a more enjoyable experience. We spend so much time at work; we have to make it enjoyable, if we can.

Rebekah [00:16:26] I want to go back to 2020. You have built a really successful business as an events director and creative director and then you lose three gigs in 24 hours when Covid hits. So can you tell us what happened?

Gill [00:16:43] Yes, well that wasn't fun. It really blindsided me, I think. I think we could all see it coming. But you know, I think like any sort of personal tragedy or professional tragedy, you can see it coming but you are almost ignoring it. I really now know what free falling feels like. It was really scary. Yes, it was confronting and scary. And it, I'm a pretty calm, measured person. It takes a lot for me to lose my temper or to rattle me and I was completely rattled by that. It took me a few days, but I picked myself up and brushed myself down and started all over again in a way, not really started all over again but I've been sort of lucky or wise, whichever way you want to look at it. And when I developed the business, half of it was about directing and producing events and putting them on, the other half was about consulting to local government agencies about their events. So that part of the business, that consulting part of the business, I just worked on that and within a couple of months I had several really great gigs, writing event strategies, advising on creative content for events, etc. So I just went, oh, okay, I'll put that bit to the side and we'll work on this bit and I was very fortunate and got quite a lot of work that way, but it was a really good reminder, if I can say that it was, I wouldn't wish it on anyone and I know there's a lot of people that are doing it a lot harder than I am, but it was a really good kick up the pants to not take things for granted and certainly to not take my career for granted. And I'm not sure that I ever had, but I probably hadn't thought about it all that much. And it also made me really focus on other things in my life that weren't work because I've been pretty work obsessed, not obsessed, but I love my work. It's so much part of who I am and it makes me happy. And it's been a massive part of my personality, I guess. But it really gave me the opportunity to focus on other parts of myself that deserved a bit of love as well.

Rebekah [00:18:52] So Gill, how has your lifestyle changed?

Gill [00:18:55] Yes, that's a good question. Well, taking on Vivid has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous, really. I think what's changed is I make more time for the things that are important to me, like I make more time to spend with my partner. I make more time to cook, I make more time to exercise. I make more time, you know, I've got a house on the south coast to spend time down there, all those things I was doing but sort of not with my full self, if that makes sense. So I'm much more aware of the things that I need in my life to make me a more rounded person and make me more happy and more productive all around.

Rebekah [00:19:33] And are you happier?

Gill [00:19:33] Yeah, I think I am. Look, I think the pandemic has shaken all of us to our cores, particularly in industries like mine, which I haven't had an event go on for two years, over two years because of Covid. And yet still we keep going and still we keep making work. It's just keeps getting postponed or whatever. But am I happier? Yes, I think I am.

Rebekah [00:19:59] I'd like to finish with your new role as Festival Director of Vivid Sydney. So Vivid, I've seen in my time in Sydney grow from this very small event to now an international icon of an event. What is it that makes Vivid special?

Gill [00:20:15] I think Vivid has become, for Sydneysiders, part of their DNA. It's interesting because it's only 12 years old and so I've taken it on just as it's about to enter its difficult teenage years. And events have very interesting lives in terms of how old they are and all of those sorts of things. But I think in a relatively short time, it's become such a part of Sydney. And it not only is about showcasing Sydney's creativity, but I think it's about this great sense of people connecting and getting together and belonging and seeing their city, literally in a new light. So it does as much for creativity as it does for business in the city. It's a huge tourism driver and huge promoter and supporter of businesses in the city. And for me, it kind of made sense. You know, all the things I've done in my life feels like have all been leading to this in a way. It's free. Most of it's free, big public events, accessible, it's putting art in places where you don't normally see it, which is what I love. It's really democratising art, I think and experience. There's a massive music program and ideas program, which really is incredibly interesting and allows us to explore ideas and themes and the way people are thinking in different ways. So, yes, but it's, it's a big beast. It's a massive beast. And we're looking at how to make it even bigger and better.

Rebekah [00:21:50] So now you're at the helm of Vivid Sydney, what's your vision going forward?

Gill [00:21:54] As I said, I think it's 12 years old and I think it's time for a reboot, really. And it's time to look at how we can do things differently. And that's not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It's looking at what works, what doesn't. Vivid's been a victim of its own success in a way because it's become so popular. So a lot of the things that we have to deal with are things like how can we spread our crowd around better, how can we expand our footprint to make sure that there's not so much pressure on The Rocks and Circular Quay? For me, it's really how can we tell a narrative with this massive event? What is it that we want to say with this event? What do we want to say about Sydney? What do we want to say about ourselves? What do we want to promote in terms of the artistry of the event? So I'm really looking at expansion with a narrative in terms of how we take it into its next phase and how we grow and develop it, but really giving it a sense of heart and a sense of soul.

Rebekah [00:22:52] Well I'm very excited to see where you take it personally, I love that event.

Gill [00:22:56] Oh, thanks. It's an interesting one because a lot of people, it has become so popular that a lot of people that I know were going, oh, I don't know, it's too hard, too many people, all of those sorts of things. So I think it's about getting Sydneysiders back to Vivid. And, yes, we've got lots of plans but I think you'll see Vivid in a new light in ways that you haven't seen before.

Rebekah [00:23:19] Thanks, Gill, final question, at Leading Women, we're all about activating women's leadership. Do you have a tool you can give us for our Leadership Toolbox?

Gill [00:23:30] I think it's important to remember why you're doing something, to go back to the source. And I know when there's a million things going on, sometimes it can be hard to do that. But something that I always remind myself of and try and remind my teams of is that when we're doing events, we're not just putting on an event. We're actually creating a memory for someone. And that might seem a little clichéd but that's our job. It's not just the site plans and where to put the toilets and the fences and who's going to be the emcee. It's about creating those memories. It's that sense of just going back to why you're doing what you're doing and trying to remember that. And I think that's something that if you've got it in your toolkit, this ability to just zero in on that sometimes, it can make you think outside the every day.

Rebekah [00:24:22] I have such beautiful memories of so many of your events.

Gill [00:24:26] Thank you that's very lovely of you to say.

Rebekah [00:24:28] I also think this idea of making memories can apply to almost any business. You think about someone using your product, you're actually creating an emotional experience as opposed to just selling whatever the product is.

Gill [00:24:40] It's so easy to lose sight of why we do what we do in any profession that sometimes it's just important to go back to that source.

Rebekah [00:24:48] Thank you so much, Gill. It has been an absolute delight.

Gill [00:24:52] My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Julienne [00:24:54] 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 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 [#leadingwomens](https://twitter.com/leadingwomens)

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