



Leading Women podcast

CommBank Women in Focus

Episode 2: Angelique Wan, CEO and Co-Founder, Consent Labs

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Interviewee: Angelique Wan

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Angelique Wan, CEO and Co-Founder, Consent Labs, on being a young leader driven by purpose, redefining success and prioritising development. Be inspired by her bold decision-making filter and how she flipped traditional workplace culture to lead the next generation with a profound social ripple effect.

Fiona [00:00:06] Welcome to Leading Women, your go-to podcast for stories, tools and resources to shape your leadership journey now and into the future. Hi, I'm Fiona McAuley, Head of Women in Focus at CommBank, joining you from Gadigal country. We acknowledge the traditional owners and recognise their continuing connection to country. We pay our respects to elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations people. Leading Women is just one way CommBank Women in Focus supports the growth of women in business and community. So, no matter where you are on your journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we hear from dynamic, inspiring, and resilient women together.

Shivani [00:00:55] Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode is a fresh and purpose-fueled conversation with the Gen Z leader challenging stereotypes and shifting culture. Angelique Wan is the CEO of Consent Labs, a collective of young people changing the culture around sexual education. Led by her "why", Angelique redefines what success looks like for her as she stepped back from her promising linear career to leap forward, propelled by her passion to wake up every day and make a difference. You'll be inspired by Angelique's bold, decision-making filter of what's the worst that can happen? And how she's turned traditional workplace culture on its head as she leads a new revolution with a profound social ripple effect. Angelique, welcome to Leading Women. It is so great to have you.

Angelique [00:01:56] Thank you, Shivani, I'm so excited to be here.

Shivani [00:02:00] And in person too, we're lucky enough to be recording this podcast together from Gadigal country. Angelique, you've had such a bold and purpose-fueled leadership journey. Can you share what ignited your leadership and your path to here?

Angelique [00:02:16] Reflecting back, it's been not as linear as I imagined my leadership path would be. It's been quite a bit of a side step and a step backwards and then a step forwards, but I think I've really found myself moving towards my purpose, my passion, my "why" in life, and I've really bravely let myself follow that and that's ultimately sort of led me to the leadership position that I'm in today as CEO of Consent Labs, which is, again, not where I ever imagined that I'd be at this point in time. Having started in the banking industry, I really thought that that's where I'd continue my career and see myself through, but being led by that, that purpose has sort of led me here today.

Shivani [00:03:06] It's so funny, isn't it? You would think that being led by purpose and being led by your "why" would be such a natural and organic thing to do. Yet, it's not the stereotypical way that we move through leadership, nor is it the stereotypical perception of our everyday leaders. Being in the CEO seat and on the decision-making table through to gaining award recognition must have been a mind shift exercise in itself. Angelique, how do you navigate breaking the mould of what leadership has traditionally looked like?

Angelique [00:03:39] It has definitely been a mindset shift, Shivani, you are so right in saying that. Like I said, I never imagined that I'd be in this CEO position or really in any sort of leadership position at the age of 26. And I stepped into this role at 24, which really took me a minute to get comfortable with. A lot of it has been about interrogating my own assumptions about who should be a CEO or what a CEO looks like, because it's not me. I'm a, as I said, a young woman. I'm a woman of colour and that's not what I imagine when I hear the word CEO. So I think a lot of it has been interrogating my own internal assumptions and leaning into the question of why not me? Like, why can't I do this? I can actually do this and approaching every sort of opportunity, every challenge, every decision along the way since I've stepped into this role as a learning opportunity. I think taking the pressure off of myself to not do everything perfectly, to not have to do everything right has really helped to, I guess, alleviate some of the pressure I feel in not being that stereotypical leader or stereotypical CEO, reframing everything to be that learning opportunity, an amazing opportunity to be confronting these challenges and these decisions at this age. Like, how lucky am I to be able to do this? But then, of course, you also have, you know, those bad days where you're really stuck in the cycles of self-doubt and can I do this? Am I the right person to be doing this? And I think that's when it's really important to have good people around you, people who you work with, but also people in your personal life that really know you and your values and your strengths because sometimes it can be really hard. Or at least I find it really hard to be able to articulate and to draw on those strengths in those, I guess, low times. And so I think really being able to lean on the people around you to be those personal cheerleaders has really, really helped.

Shivani [00:06:04] And those personal cheerleaders can really help with that reframe, I just loved, why not me? Regardless of your age and especially, you know, not despite of but especially because you are a woman and a woman of colour. You've had so much successes, but it hasn't been without its challenges. What have been some of the standout ones for you?

Angelique [00:06:26] The first five years of building Consent Labs was incredibly challenging because of my age. I perhaps went into this journey a bit naively and didn't anticipate that my age would be a barrier, but I was often confronted with dismissal or a lack of belief in abilities, or not being invited to the table where decisions are being made merely because of my age. So I think overcoming that challenge was difficult. Initially it just meant that I had to do more and had to be better, had to be better prepared, had to be able to, you know, back myself with the data. Build on my personal knowledge to ensure that I could come into those conversations and present myself with confidence. And I think there's been and there continues to be an ongoing challenge of building out what leadership looks like when you're a young leader, particularly in a space that is new for Australia. I work in the prevention of gender-based violence through the delivery of consent education, and we're really at the forefront of this change in Australia. It's seen so much traction in the past two years, but it hasn't been done before. So I think it's again always being open to getting comfortable with uncertainty and that challenges are going to come every day and that there's not necessarily a guidebook that exists, but I guess trusting in myself and my team to know that we're going to be able to work through those challenges when they arise.

Shivani [00:08:17] I want to double down on this term uncertainty, because it's something that we all run away from, whether it's physically or emotionally. Certainty gives us that strength, it gives us that stability. And it's why so many of us stay in the zone of comfortable. But moving into that growth space, how do you work through uncertainty?

Angelique [00:08:40] That's a fantastic question, Shivani, I suppose, I've sort of run towards uncertainty, which is quite funny because I used to describe myself as quite a risk-averse person. But, you know, looking back in hindsight at the decisions I've made with my life and in leadership, I don't know if that's the most apt word anymore. And I suppose it's actually a recognition that running towards uncertainty is exactly how you grow. It's never through complacency or being comfortable. And I'm inherently someone who really likes to be ambitious and challenged and always working towards the next thing. Again, I think it's all about the framing and the mindset. It's what's the worst that could happen if I try this or if I do this? And am I okay with that worst possible outcome? And in so many instances, when I've asked myself that question and looked at the worst-case scenario, I'll actually be fine and I can move through that. It might be not ideal, but it's not life shattering. And I think it's trusting in yourself to be able to pick yourself up from failure if that does happen.

Shivani [00:09:59] I love the clarity in that. What is the worst that could happen and am I okay with that? I think so many of us don't consciously ask ourselves those questions and so we unconsciously run away. Whereas as you so aptly put it, Angelique, we can run towards it that is a huge takeaway for

me. Angelique, you've taken a bold move forward by what can be seen as stepping back from a traditional career in finance to create systemic leaps in your for-purpose impact. How has this shaped your self-leadership?

Angelique [00:10:33] For me, again, it was challenging a lot of those internal assumptions that I held around success. I think, you know, going through the schooling system, growing up in a culturally diverse household where my parents placed a lot of emphasis on academic achievement and setting myself up for a "prestigious" university degree, which was, you know, one of three choices. It's you're a lawyer, you're a doctor, or you're doing business that really shaped my definition of success. It was, I suppose, that really traditional vision of what success looks like, which is that stable job in that prestigious industry. I was working in a global organisation, which was also financially stable, and I suppose really through moving through the motions of that traditional version of success that society has set for me and I suppose for all of us. But recognising that I wasn't particularly passionate about the work that I did and I really wanted to be passionate. I really wanted to wake up every day and feel excited about the work that I was doing and the impact that I was having on the world. I suppose that calling to impact really felt desirable to me. I wanted to do something bigger with my life, something meaningful with my life, and for a long time I really wasn't sure what that was. Again, I was chasing those really traditional models of success and thinking that that was it, and that's what I should be doing. But I really, I don't know, I suppose I sort of feel lucky that I happened upon this passion of mine, which I ultimately turned into this not-for-profit Consent Labs. But I felt really passionate about changing the ways in which we're all able to engage in relationships and ultimately reducing the rates of things like sexual violence. And it started, as a small kernel within me that I felt wasn't fair in the world, and I wanted to do something about it. And I just let that kernel sort of grow and ultimately guide me into, I suppose, what's now my role in leadership.

Shivani [00:13:01] This feels like a bit of a theme in your life, Angelique. Challenging norms and changing norms for the better, and you've done that from that traditional upbringing of this is the linear approach that you have in your career, in your university, in your work life, through to having an impact-based life. What advice do you have for other leaders who need to better tune in, have their antennas up, so to speak, on how to live an impact-based life for themselves?

Angelique [00:13:30] I mean, I think that can be done in so many different ways. I think it is a recognition that life feels more purposeful when you look outside of yourself. You don't necessarily have to quit your job and go and work for a not-for-profit, I think. You know, you can choose to volunteer towards a passion or a social justice issue that you feel really passionate about. You can choose to do small acts of kindness in your daily life. You can, I think, there are so many different ways in which you can live an impactful life. It's just about being conscious of it, and I suppose questioning what it is that you care about or what it is that you want to work towards, not what society says you should be working towards.

Shivani [00:14:18] What's really interesting, Angelique, is something that you said to me earlier, and it's around the notion that, you know, life or success isn't linear, but it also sounds like the resonance of having a purpose-based life isn't linear too. When you too have struggled with this throughout your journey, you're so attached to your purpose, but there have been times that you've gone, am I meant to have this purpose in life?

Angelique [00:14:40] I think I really struggled with that. I suppose I sort of looked at people around me and they were going through the daily motions of life. And I mean, I don't know whether or not they had purpose, but I suppose I was struggling to imagine going through a career of, you know, 40 or 50 years that had no purpose or had no greater impact. And I just don't think that was for me, maybe that's for other people, but that that wasn't for me. And so, again, I feel really lucky to sort of have stumbled across something that really fuels me and drives me every day. And to be able to see directly the impact that I'm able to have on Australian society and broadly, the world. I just feel incredibly grateful.

Shivani [00:15:31] Angelique, you have changed the world also, in terms of how your parents think about success given your journey, and you've taught us in this very short time together how to start rethinking your own life from a purpose-based way. How might parents speak to their children to encourage them to start thinking about living a purpose-based, impact-based life?

Angelique [00:15:53] Well, that's a good question, I will preface this by saying that I'm not a parent myself, so I come from the perspective, I suppose, of being a child with parents who had certain aspirations for me. And as I sort of said, it was those very traditional aspirations and very well-intentioned aspirations, you know, my parents worked incredibly hard to be able to set themselves up and to be able to set myself and my sister up for good quality education. And I suppose they saw that certain life for us because they didn't have that themselves. It was a challenge, and there was definitely a period where they were like, are you okay? Are you sure this is what you want to do? You've worked so hard to get yourself to this position, and you're sort of going to throw it all away, it was their perspective. But I think for them it was, you know, being able to recognise that they've raised me to be an independent and resilient person who is able to make their own decisions in the world. And as challenging as it might be that they sort of have to step back and let me try things my own way. And again, I think the framing that I said to them was worst-case scenario, what happens is this doesn't go well for me. And I go back to banking and all will be well, all will be fine. So I think that again, that notion of there are always options and I will be okay no matter what happens.

Shivani [00:17:33] I really resonated with fostering independence, and helping your children make their own decisions and stumble along the way is such a great lesson. Angelique, as a standout Gen Z leader, you've taken the reins by shifting culture and leveraging tech advances to drive impact. What can our younger leaders teach other generations from this vantage point?

Angelique [00:17:55] I think it's a really good point, and one that I've been reflecting on a lot as I've shaped the culture of our organisation. The first thing that I would say is that young people are an incredibly powerful tool that should be harnessed and should be utilised, not dismissed, really looking to the young people within your organisation for their curiosity, for their energy, for their potential innovation, for their set of fresh eyes that they bring to the work that you're doing, and seeing that as a benefit and as a positive. From my experience, young people have so much potential. You just have to be able to give them the opportunity and a sense of agency to be able to come into their own. And I think that's when they're able to do phenomenal things. And I think often organisations really miss out on harnessing the value of their young people because they're seen as more junior and they're not giving opportunities or autonomy. And I think that's a real shame. Our organisation, as an example, is youth-led. It's primarily built up of young people who, you know, don't have tenure or don't have experience of 10 or 15 years in a career. But the things that we've been able to achieve at Consent Labs out of pure passion, creativity, innovation and energy is just amazing. So I think that's the first thing I'd say is give young people an opportunity and give them a voice. And I think the second thing that I would say is, again, maybe a theme of the way that I work is challenging assumptions of what a workplace should look like, what we did and what we didn't want in terms of workplace culture and structure for Consent Labs. And we really turned everything on its head, to be honest. You know, our leadership team is mostly part-time, whereas in other organisations you'll see those roles being full-time. We wholeheartedly embrace workplace flexibility. People choose to work whatever hours they want to work how they want to work, because we're outcomes-focused. We're not face time or in-office time-focused. It's really up to the individual. You know, even down to things like it doesn't matter what you wear to the office, it's up to you. It's how you feel comfortable. You can choose to dress to the nines, or you can choose to rock up in track pants or leggings like it's really up to you. And at the heart of it, it's really valuing our individual employees as incredible people. We owe it to them to commit to their professional learning and their development, as well as to their well-being. Well-being and psychological safety is so integral to us as an organisation, as I think it should be for all organisations. And at the bottom line, like we want to have fun, we want to have fun doing the work that we're doing. I think that should be the same for all organisations. You can still be professional. You can still achieve high quality outputs, but you might as well have fun doing it. And, yes, those are the things that I would suggest. And I've been really mindful to embed as I've built Consent Labs as an organisation that's advice from a Gen Z leader.

Shivani [00:21:27] I love that, and I think, you know, the loss is on us if we don't take that advice. And I think what you've reminded us of is the benefit of reverse mentoring. You know, when leaders are mentoring other people who are much younger than them, you know, they also get so much out of it by way of life experience and innovation, and also reliving some of those early years of what opportunities can be like. But the other side is true too, you know, older leaders can learn so much from younger leaders coming up in their ranks. Angelique, on this note of mentors who have been your mentors and where have they come from?

Angelique [00:22:05] I love this question. I agree, I think, reverse mentoring has a beautiful role, as does mentoring, and I think a lot of my development, and I suppose why I'm more confident in my abilities as a young leader now, has really been due to having strong mentors in my life. I think there is a real benefit to having mentors within your industry, as well as outside of your industry. Within your industry, obviously, that's more directly relevant to the skill sets that you might want to develop and how you might want to progress forward. But I also think it's incredibly important to have an external perspective to be able to challenge, you know, the norms that come up within an industry that maybe don't have to be there or to encourage you to broaden your skill set or your perspective when tackling something. I think mentorship is incredibly important for young leaders, but it's important for everyone as you move through. And it's something that I think is easy to sort of let slip, you know, when you're really busy with daily life and work commitments. But I think it's something that I really try to consciously carve out time for on a periodic basis, and you really will reap those long-term benefits.

Shivani [00:23:28] Let's carve out some time for mentoring right here, right now. Let's do some incredible reverse mentoring, Angelique, what advice do you have to older leaders, and especially leaders who come from traditional cultures, on how they can create more flexible and inclusive cultures?

Angelique [00:23:45] I suppose it depends on your sphere of influence. I think being a role model within your team or within your organisation is the most important thing. I think the values really have to come from the top or from the leader, and you have to be able to not only talk the talk but walk the walk. So as an example, I work flexibly. I show up to work in what's considered probably not traditionally professional clothes. I encourage my staff to work flexibly as well, but I think them being able to see that I'm walking the walk and I, not only say that I value diversity, inclusion and flexibility, but I do all of those things as well ensures that they're comfortable to follow in those footsteps. I think if your leaders aren't demonstrating and living by those values, then they're going to fall flat in the face of the organisation. So I think it's really on leaders to be able to take up the mantle as role models and demonstrate how they want the culture of the organisation to live.

Shivani [00:24:51] You know, when you said that leaders may fall flat, it made me realise that the leadership imperative that they do do this because it's about future proofing their organisations and future proofing their leadership by leaning into this advice and leaning into creating a more flexible and inclusive culture for all.

Angelique [00:25:10] It absolutely is. I think it only benefits organisations. It widens up the pool of applicants who will want to work with you. You know, I think of an example. We just opened up a role a couple of months ago, which is a part-time role, and we had a mother who was just coming out of maternity leave apply for the role, and she was really upfront with her preferred working hours with us. And she said, you know, I'm sort of, I've got two kids. One of them is really young. I'm still breastfeeding at the moment, which means that, you know, it affects my working hours and my preference is to work really flexibly. I might have to work really weird ad hoc hours sometimes, you know, late at night, because that's what is best for me. Does that work for you? And I said, absolutely, as long as, again, we're outcomes-focused, as long as you're reaching, you know, the goals that we've set for you as an individual and as an organisation, as long as you're communicating that to me, it's really up to you how you choose to work. And I trust in you. I believe in you to be able to get there. So I think if you value flexibility and diversity, you are future proofing your organisation because the pool of talent that you're opening up to, the potentially untapped pool of talent, if you're not flexible working at the moment is just incredible.

Shivani [00:26:34] It really is and the onus is on us again to be able to create opportunities for working mothers to return back to work. Imagine having to leave that incredible talent at the table, when all we had to do was think about the work that we do and the outcomes we do differently. What you're saying resonates with me so personally, as a mother of two, and as someone who is looking to the couch over there with my breast pump bag right in front of me, because what I will be doing right after this episode is exactly that. So I can very much relate and it enables women like me to engage with incredible women like yourself, Angelique, can have this conversation right here and now.

Angelique [00:27:10] Yes, absolutely. Shivani.

Shivani [00:27:12] Angelique, we've talked so much about you bringing your exuberance of youth and your Gen Z style, as you've said, to really influence workplace cultures, to be flexible and inclusive. But it doesn't just stop there; you have a strong embrace of technology too.

Angelique [00:27:26] Absolutely and again, I think that's the value of young people. And giving them a voice and agency within your organisation is they tend to have a better grasp of the latest technology at hand. I think for us, social media has been such a big tool in growth as an organisation, being able to reach more customers, more people across Australia and also as a tool for accessible education. Social media has absolutely been a game changer for us, and that's where Gen Z and I suppose millennials also live. It feels like second nature to them. It feels native to be on those platforms. And I think in order to succeed on social media; if you do want to use it as a growth tool, you have to be really native to those platforms. So I suppose, you know, that's a real value add that people like myself or Gen Z or millennials have. They see the value of things like social media as a growth tool and can really leverage that.

Shivani [00:28:37] Social media is also an incredible tool for working professionals to really elevate their brand. What insights might you have for leaders who really do want to put themselves out there and show the world their leadership capabilities, but probably just don't know how?

Angelique [00:28:52] Personal branding is not something that anyone ever taught me as something to be thinking about, but it's absolutely been incredibly important to carve out time for. I think the first thing I'd say is have a think about how you want to present yourself and who your audience might be on whatever platform you choose to use. What tone of voice will you be using and what's your value add? I use LinkedIn as my personal branding platform. I don't think I could do much more than one platform at this point in time, so I sort of just stick to LinkedIn. But it's getting into a regular cadence of posting, and I suppose through time, finding that balance of what is your tone? How much do you share between professional and personal? But it's really just being consistent and starting to build a bit of a community on whichever platform you start to use. But I think personal branding is an incredibly important exercise for leaders, and not only for leaders, for people who maybe want to be leaders in future. And it's something that we should be talking more about.

Shivani [00:30:05] I think that's such an interesting orientation value add, because we often think about value add when it comes to businesses, you know, what's your value add, what's your unique selling proposition. But as leaders, we don't think about branding ourselves on LinkedIn and saying, here is my consistent leadership value add, incredible insight, Angelique, thank you. Angelique, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating leadership, what advice do you have to leave us in the Toolkit around just that?

Angelique [00:30:34] My advice would be to prioritise your professional development and when you're thinking about what development you want to be doing, think about where you want to be in two roles time so that by the time that you get to that role, you're already equipped and you've got the skill sets that you need. And I've been reflecting on this in the past week. I was on a panel with the CEO of Accor Pacific, Sarah Derry. And I think what really sort of struck me is that leaders aren't always born. They're made and they're developed through strategic and purposeful development. You know, there are so many times where I've looked up to and I've admired a leader and just thought, wow, were they born with that capacity to be an amazing speaker or motivator or whatever it might be that makes them that leader, but it's not innate. It can be developed. And those leaders probably have been going through coaching sessions and courses for years to get them to where they are. So I think that's what I would encourage everyone to do, is to purposefully look at your professional development as an individual and as a leader, and please make time for it. Again, I think it's so easy for professional learning to fall to the wayside when you're busy with your daily tasks, but it's imperative to be able to grow as an individual and grow as a leader.

Shivani [00:32:11] Yes, we often think that professional development stops once you finish a university degree and you've arrived in the world. But you're very right, professional development keeps on carrying on and it's our responsibility to prioritise it. Angelique, I've had the great pleasure of listening to you and taking my own tips from you as well. And my key takeaway is that success isn't linear, nor is an impact-based life. You need to stay committed and keep reflecting, to move forward, to reframe and to run towards uncertainty. And just like that children's nursery rhyme, you can't go under it, you can't go

over it. You just have to go through it. Angelique Wan, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

Angelique [00:32:55] Thank you, Shivani, it's been so much fun.

Fiona [00:32:59] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we shape what's next in female leadership together. So now, it's over to you. Follow Leading Women on your favourite podcast platform so you don't miss an episode, and find all the links, tips and tools discussed in our show notes.

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