



Leading Women podcast

CommBank Women in Focus

Episode 3: Kate Russell, CEO, Supply Nation

Hosted by: Shivani Gopal, CEO and Founder, Elladex

Interviewee: Kate Russell

Featuring: Fiona McAuley, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank

Kate Russell, CEO, Supply Nation on how generous mentorship supported her growth, the value in paying opportunities forward and the need to create safe spaces for minority groups to thrive. Be inspired by Kate's clarity of purpose and her unique take on how traditional cultural ways of working can guide the future of leadership.

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 [00:00:54] Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode is an authentic yarn with a progressive leader creating ripple effects by giving back to progress forward. Kate Russell, CEO of Supply Nation, is a proud Awabakal woman who, with great humility, is the sum of her diverse experiences. With deep value of education, employment and equity, Kate shares the value of collaboration, the power of mentorship, and the need to create safe spaces for minority groups to thrive. Take your front row seat and be inspired by Kate's clarity of purpose and her unique take on how traditional cultural ways of working are guiding us back to the future of leadership. Kate, welcome to Leading Women, it is so wonderful to have you here.

Kate [00:01:46] Thanks, Shivani, it's so lovely to see you again. It's a beautiful day on Gadigal country and as an Awabakal woman, I want to say to you. Wontakalowa.

Shivani [00:01:55] And Wontakalowa to you too. Kate, yours is an authentic and connected leadership journey. We'd love to hear about how you navigated your path to here.

Kate [00:02:05] Thanks, Shivani, my family really values education. My mum is a teacher, and my dad is the first person in his family to ever finish high school, let alone go to university. So education and employment have always been a constant in my career, in one way or another, leading me into government and non-profit work, it's been a focus of values and of purpose. I can say with complete humility that I was an awful employee in my early career, but some fantastic people gave me a shot and they stuck by me even when I was showing that I probably wasn't deserving. I've been an indigenous cadet. I've been a graduate, I've had scholarships. So many opportunities have come my way, and I've been smart enough to say yes to those opportunities. But it's also made me really driven to share those opportunities with others, to pay it forward, to create space, give those opportunities for women, for indigenous peoples. And I'm so fortunate to have this job now where really, that's what I have the chance to do. I can help change not only people's lives, but communities.

Shivani [00:03:08] There's this really powerful, self-fulfillment journey that is happening here of you backing yourself and others backing you and what's wonderful is that you're now paving that way for it, because, of course, you know, moving into leading government, you were very early in life, the school captain as well of your tiny little regional school as you were telling me.

Kate [00:03:30] School captain, SRC representative of my tiny little school, if you know Newcastle well, we would call it Tronno Public, a little bit rough and ready that school but that was my first step toward leadership, and I think it did give me the confidence to pursue that. I do like having influence. I do like being able to create change. And as I said, I've been smart enough to say yes to opportunities as they've come my way.

Shivani [00:03:54] And now you're here for that ripple effect, giving back to progress forward and there's so much of that in your career as you've just shared from so many angles. And a wonderful example of this is your board coming to you with the CEO opportunity when you were on maternity leave and giving you the space to lead in your own way. How does the philosophy of giving back to progress forward work in your leadership role?

Kate [00:04:19] You're absolutely right. The board coming to me when I had a baby on my lap and asking me to apply for the CEO of Supply Nation role, it meant the world to me. I had been rejected from more junior roles because simply because I'd asked to work a four and a half day week. So it really spoke to the values of community and of culture of the board and the organisation that they were willing to have that conversation with me upfront and early, rather than at the pointy end of a recruitment process. They weren't the first people to be generous in that way with me. I worked with an incredibly senior woman in government when I had my first baby, and she welcomed me back, saying I could work a condensed workweek, recognising that I still have financial obligations. But it was so important for me to spend that quality time with my children while they were still young. So for me now, I want to do the same thing for others, whether it's my EA or whether it's a board member or whether it's a senior leader in my team. It's creating space for women and for parents to make sure that they can have a fulfilling career and fulfilling home life at the same time.

Shivani [00:05:26] It's a very strong example of leading self and leading others and having very clear boundaries of what you want to do for your career, but also there for your family. It's incredible because we all talk about the four-day workweek now, but you were years, decades ahead of your time in those junior roles from what you're telling me.

Kate [00:05:45] Oh look, I think it's also just smart business, isn't it? If I could fill my entire team with return to work parents, they are the most productive, the hardest workers, most passionate people that you will ever find. So it's not just the right thing to do, it's not just about equity. It's also a very smart thing for people to do to allow people to find that balance in a way that works for them.

Shivani [00:06:06] Kate, what you've highlighted for us is the dangers of leaders not understanding our full potential and supporting our growth via adjusted weeks like the four-day work week. And it sounds to me that this is also something that becomes risky to women because we end up becoming, as you put it, the sandwich generation. Tell me about that.

Kate [00:06:26] So women in our era, we are missing that entire generation, people my age, we're often caring upward for elders, for aunties, uncles, mothers, fathers, fathers-in-law and we're also caring down for small people. It's a lot of pressure and we're supposed to do that while maintaining a 38-hour week and bringing our best selves to work every day. So when I have the opportunity to create space for women and just for parents to be able to find that balance, that's a priority for me and my leadership, particularly indigenous women, so they play such an important role in community. They have cultural and family obligations that cannot be underestimated, and they are the foundations of our families and communities. We are so often overlooked and undervalued in professional settings, but I have an opportunity to remedy that. So 50% of the Supply Nation leadership team are Aboriginal women and I'll tell you what, they are so powerful.

Shivani [00:07:20] I bet they are, especially with a leader like you at the helm because, Kate you've been there, done that, you are genuinely walking the walk, and you have the same pressures of supporting up, down and managing, you know, these cultural obligations and family obligations, which speaks to me about a huge mental load, as you put it. There's so much pressure around this, and yet we've got to bring our best selves to work. What are your thoughts on best self versus whole self to work, and how do you nurture that in your organisation?

Kate [00:07:51] Interesting question, so I sit on the board of the Diversity Council of Australia, and we have an annual diversity debate. And a few years ago we were actually talking about should you bring your whole self to work? And the resounding result of this, you know, quite comedic debate that we hold every year as a fundraiser was, no, you should not bring your whole self to work because sometimes your whole self is not appropriate for work. I really agree with the sentiment that you should be able to be comfortable to express yourself and your beliefs at work. However, of course you need to uphold code of conduct. You need to do that in an appropriate way. For me, I try and be authentic in that it means I'm informal. I will probably sometimes say the wrong thing. I will make mistakes. I like knowing my team. I don't necessarily want to go out for dinner every night with them, but I like having friendly relationships. To me, especially as a small non-profit, I want it to feel like an extension of family to some extent. I want to know what's going on if someone's having something in their life to be able to say, how's your son, is he feeling better, happy birthday, that, for me, is creating a safe space at work because if you feel comfortable to have those conversations with senior leadership, you'll be comfortable to challenge them and tell them if they're making a mistake. To have those open conversations again, it's not just for the benefit of our people that's for the benefit of the business.

Shivani [00:09:08] It is such a refreshing but also realistic take on this argument of best self versus whole self, because I think so many of us veer away from that and talk about the fact that, no, it should be okay to bring your whole self and the change that you've just made. There is what we need is safe spaces for your best and most appropriate self. It strikes me, Kate, that you are a personification of what is old is new again. You clearly see a strong alignment with what we hold up now to be this new way of leadership style and traditional values of collaboration, listening, of trust, of communication, of safe spaces like we've just talked about and indigenous cultural practices. What are you seeing in the leadership realm that's positive about collaboration and community style leadership?

Kate [00:09:58] It has been interesting to watch the change of what is good leadership in the past decade. There's been much conversation, and I think that's a very positive about the feminisation of leadership but there's not been enough conversation around the indigenisation of leadership. I think those traditional values from community of trust, communication, of yarning, of respect, these are values that I can walk into any indigenous community in the world and have a shared understanding. And I think if there's a shared understanding amongst some of the oldest cultures in the world of what it takes to be a good leader, then I think there's got to be something to it. When I see these international leaders come together on an international level, there's this magic energy based on values and experiences and ways of working that facilitates trust and understanding. I think indigenous peoples are naturally very collective, collaborative leaders. They lead for others more than for themselves. We are generous in spirit and generous in knowledge and our time. And what leader wouldn't want to have that as their professional reputation and what person wouldn't want to work for somebody who has that as their professional reputation? I do think professional and corporate Australia in particular, still has a lot to learn from what is the oldest continuing culture on Earth.

Shivani [00:11:16] Kate, you've got some really interesting insights around masculine leadership styles versus feminine leadership styles. Can you share that with us?

Kate [00:11:24] I feel like some of those traditional leadership styles are very direct. They're very, I'm single-minded. I'm going to make up my decision. I'm not necessarily going to collaborate. It's all about being the loudest, most direct voice in the room. And in fact, I still see some leadership courses based on, you know, attracting women. And they talk about how to stand, how to be, how to dress, what to do and it's all very masculine. And I think personally, it's not about teaching women how to fit into society. What we need is for men and for society to make space for women. There's nothing wrong with me. There's nothing wrong with you. How we lead is completely fine. Society needs to change their expectations of how we lead.

Shivani [00:12:09] We don't need to man-wash ourselves. We need space to be included.

Kate [00:12:13] I have never heard that before, but I will be using it.

Shivani [00:12:16] I just came up with it actually when you talked about the fact that we're being taught to lead like men, we're man-washing ourselves, and there is absolutely no need to do that when leadership should be genderless.

Kate [00:12:27] Absolutely.

Shivani [00:12:28] Kate, I want to talk about the power of partnerships, because you talked so powerfully about collaboration and why that's so important. And if anything, the femininity that's in that and Supply Nation is all about partnerships, and you have an incredible talent of bringing people together as a natural collaborator with cultural integrity. How do we as various leaders, business leaders, cultural leaders, thought leaders and community leaders, how do we turn this talent of collaboration into powerful business leverage?

Kate [00:13:01] I still think that sometimes collaboration is a bit of a dirty word, particularly in senior leadership, which is crazy because you're never going to know everything. You have to find those people that complement you and that can work together. The relationships that you build are going to have ups, they're going to have downs. And at the very least, I think you need to be communicative. You need to be collaborative, and you need to work towards those common goals. You don't have to always agree, but it's been a huge shift in the way the Supply Nation wants to do our business with our partners. So my view is that Supply Nation and indigenous people and women for that matter, we can't change the world alone. We need partners. We need to collaborate with other organisations and other individuals that have larger scale impact. I wish that we could change the world on our own, but we can't. We need allies. We need supporters. I wish the community could achieve all of the things and achieve equity for indigenous peoples alone, but that's not going to happen. I don't think I'll be making myself redundant any time soon. This takes time. It's building relationships have to be based on those cultural ways of working. True collaboration, true partnership and those words are often used interchangeably. And I do think that's incorrect but you have to be able to speak freely. You have to challenge one another. You have to make sure that everything you're doing isn't just for the sake of service, but it has to be driven by purpose, by meaning, objectives. And you have to be equally in it together. And so even finding an organisation or person that complements you, that matches you, this doesn't happen overnight and they don't grow on trees. It takes a lot of time and a lot of effort. And I think that's been the secret to our success. It requires a constant demonstration on both sides that you are committed to this. What we see particularly is the latest strategic collaboration that we've got with CommBank. We know what our strengths are. We know what we can do to leverage them and how we can work together. It's the same as a marriage. It's the same as a friendship. And we've been working with CommBank for 15 years, so that's longer than my marriage. But there are so many players out there at the moment that want to work with Supply Nation and with other indigenous organisations. We have a huge amount of allies and that's a very nice problem to have, isn't it? But we have to set the foundations and get it right because as a small national non-profit, we can't afford to get that wrong. We can't rush it. And as an often marginalised group, we often have this sense of gratitude. I feel like if someone comes to us with an offer to partner or to collaborate, that we feel obliged to say yes, and that comes from this constant deficit that I think we're made to feel. And I think women can probably relate to that as well. You should take any offer because you don't know when the next one's going to come along. And so for me, and I think for many other people, it's about taking the time and being confident in yourself to be really selective with your partnerships, to be really selective with who you collaborate on.

Shivani [00:15:57] I suddenly had this phrase that popped up in my head, which is gratitude versus alignment. It's not that we should be overly grateful for opportunities. It's this opportunity aligns with me, and so I will give it the benefit of my time. Kate, you've talked about collaboration a lot, and the thing that pops up in my mind is how do you open yourself up for collaboration because you talked about the fact that you're never going to know everything. We do need other people to help us out, and we do need people in power to create change. But how do you open yourself up and manage that nuance of vulnerability versus growth?

Kate [00:16:35] It's really tricky, and I wish I had the answer. The way that I've been working at Supply Nation is I have been fortunate enough to inherit some longstanding relationships between Supply Nation and some of our partners. But it's having the support of the board as well to think strategically, to have those challenging conversations. And now I have a wonderful leadership team. We work together on this. There's no such thing as a bad idea, so we can sit down and have open conversations where I hope that they will challenge me. I proactively encouraged them to give me feedback and to challenge me so we could say, is this the right idea? Am I crazy? Should we be doing this? And that allows a safe space to fall. What I need as a CEO is to have people around me who can tell me, what are you doing, like that's a bit crazy. And they can say that with respect. And they say that with love. But often when you're in a position of power, no one challenges you, well what the board does. But at an operational

level, no one challenges you. And that's my fear that I'm going to start down a garden path, and it's going to be wrong. And no one has felt comfortable enough to say to me, I think you need to reconsider that. That to me, when my team can challenge and can ask those hard questions, that's how I know that I have a good relationship with them. And that's how I know that we are an effective team.

Shivani [00:17:54] And the demonstration of you building allies as well, Kate, in your early story, you were sharing with us how so many others backed you and developed your career journey and as a result of that and the collaboration that you've had with so many others, you've ended up with a very well-rounded form of leadership, a generalist style leadership. Can you take us through the benefits of that?

Kate [00:18:17] Absolutely and maybe I can walk you through how I got there as well. As I said, I've had some fantastic leaders who have backed me. But the moment for me that everything changed was after I'd had my first baby. I worked for a senior woman, who actually helped me curate my career, and she said this job because it was so intense and hectic, it's not a forever job. It's a two-year job and you shouldn't be working here. After two years, you'll be burnt out. But where do you want to go from here? What do you want to do? And I mean, it's kind of the question that everybody wants to get asked, but when you're actually asked, it's quite daunting and quite confronting, particularly postpartum. I don't think my head was screwed on straight. I hadn't slept more than four hours, but I knew that I wanted to be a generalist. I knew that I liked having diversity in my job. I liked every day to be a little bit different. And even though I probably have some strengths in people and culture and governance, I really wanted to be able to work across the breadth and depth of a full portfolio. So she sat me down. She said, look, here's your CV, here are your skills. I think this is what we need to do to round them out. So for example, one example would have been, financial skills. I'm very comfortable and very competent in finance, but probably because there's no obvious reference to that in my professional or educational background, it seemed to be this one area that I would always be asked on. Oh, but how comfortable are you with numbers? And you think, well, I've run multi-million dollar projects and they've gone quite well, so one would think that I'm okay. So she actively sought out opportunities for me to be able to speak to those experiences in interviews, which is such a different way of how I had managed my career to date, which was to some extent a bit of dumb luck and a bit of saying yes to things as they came along. It was such a thoughtful approach for this woman who was so busy, but she'd had the same experience. She had come back to work part-time as an executive director in state government, with two small children under three years old. She knew exactly what it was like to be where I am, and she paid it forward, and now I have the opportunity to pay it forward.

Shivani [00:20:30] It's such an echo of what we talked about around your leadership journey, and that is what is old is new again. We are taught so much that become a specialist, drill down and just have this uniqueness about you. What is your USP and it's all around specialisation and you've just shared with us the benefits of generalisation and having a well-rounded but curated, focused career. And what I love about it is if we don't do that, it's where our imposter syndrome starts to come in, isn't it? We start to play small in the areas where we don't have a level of knowledge, in your case, finance but, you've developed that, you've worked through that and you are now a generalist with diversity in your career. What a wonderful benefit of all of that. Kate, as an experienced board director and now CEO, what would your one key nugget of wisdom be to share with aspiring leaders as they navigate their own path?

Kate [00:21:26] We hear a lot about sponsorship and mentorship, and I hadn't really thought about it in that way. But reflecting back, it's find that person or find those people, you know, whether it's your unofficial board of directors that you can go to with or your Jedi circle, who are a group of people with all these different skills that you can tap into, who can support you. But I've been fortunate enough to have people who have backed me, who have challenged me, who have helped me in my career. People who I used to work for ten years ago that I still have on speed dial, who call me up. It is the power of networking and to be honest, most of them are women and I don't think that's accidental. I think my unconscious bias is quite conscious in the fact that I really enjoy working for and working with women. It's not easy to do, but find those people who see something in you. Have those difficult conversations. Be open with them. Tell them what you want to do, where you want to go. Ideally, those people can also be your boss. They can be your mentor, and hopefully that one day they'll also become your friend.

Shivani [00:22:29] Kate, we all want these lifelong friendships, these incredible mentoring relationships that last. But how do you find a great mentor and how do you find a great mentor that'll turn into a sponsor for you?

Kate [00:22:42] It can be difficult. I think sometimes it's listening to the energy and to your gut feeling, who do you have that feeling with when you speak to them? Is it someone that you've worked with in the past? Is it someone that you admire? You do have to work on it and be brave. It could be approaching someone that you don't necessarily have a relationship with, but you admire where they are or what they do or how they work. Reach out. Ask them for a coffee. Ask them about themselves. Everybody likes to talk about themselves deep down, and everyone wants to be made to feel like they are important and that they have something to share. So it can be awkward reaching out to somebody that you don't know and saying, hi, I'm a bit of a fan and I'd really like to take you for a coffee, but you have to curate those. And I think having a number of those proactively scheduling them into your diary so that you're having at least a coffee a week or a coffee a month or whatever it might be, until you build up that rapport that you feel confident enough to call that person and say, I've got a problem, you're really good at this, could you help me? Or to say, I'm not really happy where I am. I'm looking for my next challenge. What do you think I should do?

Shivani [00:23:44] There's that theme again around curation. You're curating your own success by seeking out the person and then having a brief ready. As you've just said, I'm not happy where I am or I'm ready for my next challenge and what do I do from there? In our previous conversations, Kate, there was also this sense of clarity of purpose. Know what you want, but also know what you don't want. For example, for you with I don't want to be a CMO or a chief marketing officer, as they say, or a chief people officer. For me, it was all about diversity.

Kate [00:24:15] Exactly, one of my early experiences was, as I said, fortunate enough to become an indigenous cadet. I was studying International Relations at the time I was 18. I'd moved away from my home to Sydney. No one in my family could really tell me what International Relations is all about, but I was very excited that I was going to be a diplomat. Then I was lucky enough to get a cadetship with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and I was convinced this was it for me. I moved to Canberra and then realised I hated it and it was not what I wanted to do. It was a massive setback, being two years into a four-year degree and realising I was probably not studying the right course, but it was really helpful to figure out for me what I didn't want to do. It didn't necessarily show me where I wanted to go, and if I think back now, I studied Foreign Affairs and International Relations, majoring in Spanish, and now I'm running a national non-profit focusing on indigenous business that's a very interesting line to draw, but it is. It's that diversity of experience. Every experience is a good one. It doesn't have to be direct. So many of my friends studied law. Very few of them are now practising law, because I think sometimes you have to try something to figure out what you do or don't want to do that takes bravery. It takes courage to then turn around and say, oh, I've got quite the HECS debt, and yet I'm going to persevere because I think there is something valuable in this.

Shivani [00:25:36] You know, HECS debt aside, you are the living, breathing example of you are the sum of all of your experiences because all of those diverse experiences have come together to place you exactly where you are in your leadership career. Kate, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. What sage advice can you leave for us in the Toolbox for leadership?

Kate [00:25:56] If I can be greedy and give two tips.

Shivani [00:26:00] Always the overachiever, Kate, do it.

Kate [00:26:03] One book that I read early in my career, and it was actually on the recommendation of one of my executive coaches, a book by Kim Scott, and it's called Radical Candor. It was all about how to give and receive feedback based on kindness. And I think kindness is absolutely underrated as a leadership skill. And as an early career manager, I had no idea how to manage those conversations so for me, that was a game changer. My second one was a more recent book that I've read. It's called The Dreaming Path by Uncle Paul Gordon, and it is the best example that I've found to date that applies indigenous thinking and spirituality to a professional setting. I actually went and spent some time with Uncle Paul on Darkinjung Country before I started the role at Supply Nation, and it was an absolute sort of palate cleanser. For me, it showed me how I can re-center myself, how I can focus. It gave me the tools to care for myself, my community and my family while having this incredible career in an

indigenous organisation. So if you get a chance to read either of those books, I really would recommend it.

Shivani [00:27:08] It sounds like a good investment, especially around the thought of kindness in feedback. Feedback rich environments are high, thriving environments. And you're right, kindness is so underrated. Kate, I've been listening very keenly, having this incredible front stage pass to your leadership journey, and I'd like to add some sage advice from you that I picked up as nuggets along the way. And that is always have clarity of purpose. So curate my career and curate the sprint, the sprint of two years and make it as your best self, but do it in a safe space and with the mindset of alignment over gratitude. And when in doubt, when discombobulated, go back to country and reset because we all can do with a palate cleanser from time to time. Kate Russell, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

Kate [00:27:59] Thank you Shivani.

Fiona [00:28:02] 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.

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.