



Leading Women podcast

CommBank Women in Focus

Episode 8: Kylie Walsh, Founder and Director, REGROWTH

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Interviewee: Kylie Walsh, Founder and Director, REGROWTH

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

Kylie Walsh, Founder and Director, REGROWTH believes slowing down and taking everything in your stride can get you to your destination faster. Get to know about her young start in business, how she deliberately invests in people and the power of letting others be your mirror.

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 a captivating conversation with a trusted leader, who was advancing an entire industry while supporting regional Australia. Kylie Walsh, founder and director at REGROWTH is an expert coach, consultant and recruiter. Passionate about the human capital of the real estate industry, the talented people, the clients and the community, tune in to Kylie's philosophy that slow is smooth and smooth is fast. Her personal story of resilience and her sage advice that you have got to change someone else's life to really live. Kylie, welcome to Leading Women. It is so wonderful to speak with you today.

Kylie [00:01:45] I'm excited to be here, thanks so much for having me.

Shivani [00:01:47] You're very welcome and today I'm speaking to you from our studios on Gadigal Country. Where are you joining us from?

Kylie [00:01:54] I'm joining you from the traditional lands of the Kaurana people.

Shivani [00:01:56] Kylie, yours is an expansive and transformational leadership journey. What has shaped your leadership path to here?

Kylie [00:02:03] Look, I think it all started with my childhood. I'm a big believer that you're shaped by your behaviours, the disciplines, the contribution and the curiosity that you're allowed as a child. And I couldn't have asked for more as a child around those things. Mum and dad had a really hard work ethic. They're big believer in your community and what you give out is what you give back, and that contribution is so incredibly important. But I think that work ethic, from whatever age we could walk and drive the farm vehicles; we were out there doing our bit, from cotton chipping to picking up stones to buying cattle early. Mum and dad instilled in us how incredibly important that was. I bought my first office straight out of when I did studying, so I studied marketing accounting at business college and whatever I can do in a short period of time, I always look for what's the most efficient way to do it. So I guess instead of going to uni for me, business college worked well because I could do that in 12-month period of time and then get out into the wide world. So I bought my first office at 21, probably didn't know any better and I learnt a lot by making a lot of mistakes. It was probably not repeating those mistakes over and over again that really shaped me in leadership. Getting some good mentors early on, so when I sold my first office, I then was really lucky in that I went into a national role in corporate

leadership for Elders Limited, and I learnt a lot there. And I think given that traditionally it was a very male-dominated company, I learnt that it was important to be professional, have a voice and your voice just wasn't what you said, it was what you didn't say, your behaviour, your contribution, again, your disciplines and the importance of diversity of thought because I think when I was 21 and I bought my first office, I thought I knew everything and I knew nothing. And I started with that sort of level one leadership, I got the title, I was the boss, I bought the organisation. I didn't really know anything else about elevating people around me, taking on feedback, giving feedback, the importance of trust in leadership to create followers and get everyone aligned. It was, I was very, very selfish earlier in my career. And I'll talk a little bit later about the impact that that had, but also what I've learnt to go through to level four and level five leadership and the importance of that evolution. So after my first office that national role with Elders Limited, which is incredible, and then I went into high performance coaching with LJ Hooker, which was also another national brand. And then I met a lady by the name of Di Jones who changed my life forever. So 31 years consolidated into about 2 or 3 minutes, but evolved from leadership, I guess, in the bush to metro areas. And the stories I told myself about how you had to be better in metro, which is just rubbish. So you know, the fundamentals of leadership, no matter where you are, are the same and the opportunities are the same. It's just the self-belief, your tribe and, what you prepared to commit, I guess, to your craft.

Shivani [00:05:06] You took me down a really powerful journey there, Kylie and my mind just went to a quote that I think we can now attribute to you, and it is that leadership doesn't necessarily equal wisdom that is curated through your journey. And my goodness, haven't you left already, you're not even done yet such a powerful legacy.

Kylie [00:05:26] Look that's very kind of you to say, but I'm always, you know, learning and I've got lots to learn yet. But I think curiosity and collaboration are just so incredibly important when you're a leader. We never know all the answers and back, I guess, to my original journey in leadership. It's the things that we think we're good at that are probably your greatest weakness. I'm a big believer in leadership often your greatest strength can blindside you to your greatest weakness. And an example of that for me is my speed. So I work very, very quickly and that's a theme you'll hear from today because I love what I do. And when people say you need to have work life balance, sustainability and leadership. I believe that I found how to join the two, and I think that's where the magic comes. When you can get your values aligned to your passion and your purpose. But no, look, I have not left a legacy yet. I'm only just getting started.

Shivani [00:06:20] I think that's one of the many things that's unique about you, Kylie, because you do get lots of feedback. You know, you should do work life balance and this is how it should be done. Sometimes we take that feedback and sometimes we go, well, actually, I know me. I am the best leader and director and producer of my own life. So sometimes you've taken feedback, other times you've acted on it and built it into elite performance, and then taken the rare step to elevating in an industry. What was your motivation for an internal industry focus, rather than the dizzying heights of the corporate ladder?

Kylie [00:06:53] Look, I think I've been incredibly lucky in my career, and then I was offered some very solid corporate roles in my early 30s and going back into, you know, a hyper local business and building with the leadership team it to New South Wales' largest independently owned and most successful agency taught me that I probably loved more of that one-on-one rather than large scale. I didn't want to travel. I had cancer six years ago and was very, very ill. It was a point in my time when I really started to get aligned on my values and purpose and what I wanted to do, and being offered some CEO roles of major networks, probably 15 years ago, would have really excited me. But when I left and sold out of my last business, it didn't excite me as much. I knew there were problems in our industry around sustainability of not just business with profit and efficiencies, but sustainability itself. And I was probably sick of seeing a lot of friends and colleagues not have that. And I really wanted to help industry find some solutions around that. I felt, without sounding arrogant because I'm a big believer when you're good at something, own it. I felt was a subject matter expert, and I knew that I could solve problems for industry around sustainability of health, sustainability of business and have a fresh approach or be a fresh set of eyes going into industry. I wanted to build something with people that I'd worked with before that was really important to me, because I'm a single mum with two girls and I wanted them to see that even though I had been successful in a lot of other areas with a lot of other companies, it had often been in a partnership situation not there's anything wrong with that, but I just wanted to be really bold and back myself and show the girls that there's never a right time. And when I say to girls, I mean my

children, there's never a right time. You've just got to back yourself and be courageous and go and do it. I believe you get one chance in life. It's not a dress rehearsal, so step up and own it and give it the best that you can right now. So that was probably the key motivators in me not taking a traditional CEO role in corporate and a very nice salary, but to build something, leave a legacy and solve a problem that really had purpose for me.

Shivani [00:09:04] You are such a shining example of taking the path less trodden and paving your own way to success. Kylie, how did you get such uncanny clarity of purpose be so aligned around your connection with sustainability?

Kylie [00:09:18] You know, obviously I was triggered by the cancer journey, but I also I think it's actually pretty easy when you love what you do. And I think that's, you know, it's really sad when I say people that are in roles that don't love what they do, and they're there by default, and the joy and the passion and what can be achieved with teams and leaders when truly everyone buys into the vision and where you're heading. I think my tribe, I've been incredibly lucky. It's not just the harder you work, the luckier you get, but I believe that the people that you spend your time with and who you invest your time with and freeing up the future, probably of energy vampires or people that hold you back or to remove yourself from that is incredibly important because days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, and months turn into years very quickly. So, you know, change, action, ownership and radical accountability for yourself is what's probably led me down the path of where I am. And self-awareness again, what you're good at, what you're not good at, getting feedback from those whose opinions matter because everyone wants to tell you what you're not doing right. But then what you do with that feedback in your leadership journey and taking action from that so you can get better at being better and being a better leader for people around you. So they do want to follow you. So you build relationships based on mutuality and trust, because when you've got authentic trust, people will follow you, even if out of curiosity.

Shivani [00:10:45] As a leader, not just of others, but an incredible self leader, what are some of your non-negotiables in life?

Kylie [00:10:51] Truth, I'll have your back if you have mine. I can't tell you how many times I've said that to team members, clients and partners that I work with. In our business, we have access to a lot of confidential information not only around financials, people's personal situations and, you know, trust is just something that I've always been non-negotiable on. Bringing the best version of yourself every day, we all get tired, and we all can get fatigued knowing when those triggers are. So the people that I work with, again, coming from my cancer journey, if we want to be sustainable in business and life, we've got to look after our self. So knowing what the triggers are, the red flags are is incredibly important. And loyalty and energy again, because I move quickly, I expect a lot is that energy but loyalty and that shoulder-to-shoulder. If there is not something in it for both parties and someone's always taking, particularly as a leader, people will cotton on to that pretty quickly. And if I can't change someone's life as a leader or have an impact for the better, then I don't think I've done my job. So to summarise and close, I think trust, loyalty, energy, mutuality and changing lives, got to change someone's life or you haven't lived.

Shivani [00:12:05] You've got to change someone's life or you haven't lived and I think an extension to that, Kylie, to use your own words is the best way to change your own life is to wake up every day and be the best version of yourself. It's such simple but powerful advice, and it's something that I think we can't hear enough of.

Kylie [00:12:22] I have a dad who's extremely positive and ever since we were kids, every morning when you get up, you've got to smile and be grateful that you get out of bed and put two feet on the ground. It's an honour and a privilege not everyone gets in their life. And ever since I was little that's been put into me. And it's a saying that, you know, that I find myself saying all the time as well. And I believe it is, you know, we're so incredibly lucky to get out of bed not everyone gets that opportunity so and especially since cancer, I'm grateful every day I get up.

Shivani [00:12:50] Kylie, in listening to you, what I can hear is that you are such a strong example of having grit and determination, and in fact, you've done that for your own life. When you flung open your consulting doors one year after we were plunged under the deepest uncertainty of COVID. Can you talk us through your thought process there?

Kylie [00:13:11] Yes, so second lockdown, who starts a consulting, public speaking and events company that was interesting. So straight away we had to evolve it and make changes. We had a lot of things booked. We'd sold tickets and I thought, goodness me, I've come out of a really good company, I've got credibility in industry and I'm going to go into this and I'm going to go broke in the first month. So it was sitting down and actually slowing down and I can't stress the importance of that enough. Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast. So removing yourself from your everyday and the distractions and noise and being with yourself and saying, okay, what could go wrong and what could go right? And then again, that self-belief of you're a subject matter expert. You've got great relationships. You know, I've always said that your network is your net worth. So leverage that, leverage the relationship, pick up the phone and talk to people. And I think that's become a real problem. You know, keyboard warrior, if relationships are important to you and they're very important to me, is that contact, human touch, face-to-face or conversation. And I think so much now we replace the conversation or the communication piece with text or email and it's not effective. So pivoting, staying true to myself that I had a story to tell and I had a problem that I could solve for people and I could help lighten the load. And just again, surrounding myself with mentors and people whose opinions mattered of that, you can do it and then me telling myself I could do it, and just going out and having a crack because what was the worst thing that was going to happen? It didn't work.

Shivani [00:14:54] Kylie, we live in the most connected times with texts, Internet, as you said, social media, all of that and yet we are so epically lonely. And as you said, your network is your net worth. How might we get outside of ourselves, get out of our own way if we are feeling nervous, anxious, perhaps uncomfortable even to just pick up the phone and make a phone call, or even get out of the house and go and have that coffee meeting.

Kylie [00:15:22] I think time is a choice, and how we spend time says a lot about our priorities in life. I think we're becoming disconnected. So I know there's so many channels, but I think it's very hard for people to stay present and forge really purposeful connections with communication because often when you know you're scrolling or you're on your keyboard and you're not in a conversation where you've got to be present, I don't think your connection is as powerful. Not saying that connection online isn't powerful, but the power of leadership when you can be present, whether it be online, face-to-face, or whatever it is with your people and what that can do to momentum, growth, job satisfaction, building relationships based on trust is incredibly important. So I think we just need to be careful about how we are connecting and is it right for that person or is it right for us? So, you know, pivoting to how your people want to be connected with how they best respond in leadership, not what suits you, because you'll never get the best from your people or your clients or your customer if you are not connecting with them and how they want to be connected with and how they best react to that communication, I'm pretty passionate about that.

Shivani [00:16:34] Let's talk about reaction because you did start your consulting business one year after COVID and all your events were cancelled and yet you thrived. How do you go through your own internal mental gymnastics when doors are closed in front of you?

Kylie [00:16:51] I think you've got to think about the delivery or the context with your communication. So, you know, you could put up three different topics around, okay, our events are cancelled and this is why and three different people would deliver it three different ways. For us then it was providing context to our customer about why they still had to do Zooms or Teams with us and the importance of that. Or whilst we can't have this event in March, we're going to do it in May and then relating that to topics and context for them. But again, it just came back to self-belief, stepping up and owning it. I had taken people out really good secure jobs, so it was their livelihood on the line as well. So it was that mutuality. We're in this together. It just came down to resilience but that for me means health. So making sure that I was sleeping, making sure that I continued to exercise, making sure that I was staying connected to people that motivated me and because I think it was really, really easy in COVID not to exercise, and so many people became a prisoner to their keyboard and in fact worked longer hours. So I talk about the six pillars or the six key elements of resilience for me and sleep, nutrition, food, connection, self-development, always doing, I thrive on professional development in podcasts and reading books, and your tribe for me was probably what got me through it and that's how we punch through just sheer determination and grit.

Shivani [00:18:17] Kylie, now let's journey from the bustling streets of Sydney to the heart of the bush. Not many metro-hearted women leaders go regional, but you've created a phenomenal difference in regional Australia and continue to. This chapter of your generous story is so heartwarming. How did it start for you?

Kylie [00:18:36] Look, I'm born and bred near a little town called Boggabri. I grew up on a 4,000-acre property there, and it still to this day is the most joyous time of my life. I was incredibly blessed. I feel sorry for people that haven't got to experience regional Australia and what it's got to offer, but I'm also, incredibly lucky with my career and, you know, the wealth that that's allowed me to create and the lifestyle. So during the drought, which is the story I think we're alluding to, I'm flying home one day and I look out the window and I look down and I just see the parched earth, and I have a look. This is not good enough. We are not doing enough about this. And at the time, I was working with the organisation and one of the owners at Di Jones Real Estate, and we had an incredibly great group of human beings there. And I went back to Sydney and said, guys, we've got to do something. And there was a couple of other really big personalities from the bush and had connections in the bush and like a couple of drinks later and we came up with this brand explosion around the Drought Drive. And when you talk about, what's better, a great strategy or a great culture, if there was ever a case where culture eats strategy for breakfast, this was it. So we created the Di Jones Drought Drive, and what that was, was, we did 3,000km in a couple of days. We took a convoy of over 100 cars from Sydney. We had staff, suppliers, partners, all buying from the bush for Christmas. And we all did our Christmas shopping. So I can remember the night we arrived in Dubbo and we stayed in motels and we bought Christmas presents. But the sense of community and connection again, going out and sitting on farmers' lawns and taking out care packs and talking to people about what they were going through and just connecting with them. We had a number of people say that we saved their life. We had a number of kids run up to our cars in Gilgandra, Walgett and say, thanks, we're going to have Christmas because you guys have come to town and I can't tell you how much money and time that we spent as an organisation trying to get culture to a certain point in the early parts of that business, and what we did in three days when people were connected, believed and had purpose in what we were doing and supporting the bush, where if those little towns we lose business, you'll never get them back. And I'm so incredibly proud of what we achieved there. I'm incredibly proud of what regional Australia have built. Some of the best business minds in this country come from the regional areas and because of technology now, like you say, with connection, people can operate from those areas and don't miss a beat. So I'll never forget the roots where I grew up and I'll never forget. And I don't think anyone should doubt how regional Australia is the heartbeat. We get our food there, we get our produce there, and if we don't look after it, then it's going to be a massive problem and challenge. But I'm just passionate about the bush. I'm passionate about the people and we should do everything we can to give back to it.

Shivani [00:21:37] Indeed we should and this is yet another example of how you are genuinely changing lives, and not just for others, but also for your own family. You've got a unique take on how you see your own legacy in the eyes of your daughter.

Kylie [00:21:53] Yes, I've got two girls and they're great kids. I'm sure everyone says that about their children. And quite often they'll say things like, mum, you're not on stage now giving a motivational speech, but they're really good at accountability for me back. So, you know, obviously they hear me in the car or doing Zooms at home and they always throw the feedback one at me. So mum, you've got to give feedback, but you've got to take it. And my ten-year-old said to me the other day, she said, isn't it wonderful mum? We can achieve anything. And I said, well, I couldn't climb Mount Everest. And she said, well you could, it's just a mindset thing. And I thought, aged ten, I've done my job. But I'm trying to instill in them the values and the disciplines that my parents gave me and giving back. They helped me with all the community organisations that I'm involved in, because I want them to know what it's like to give and receive and contribute. When I had cancer, our team cooked for my family for seven months, and every Monday morning after chemo, they would leave two eskies at the front door and we did not cook or want for anything for school lunches, meals or anything. And I said to the children that is a lesson in life about who I've mentored, what I've given back and how that comes back to you in times of need. We have the greatest learnings from the greatest adversity so guys, if you're listening and things go bad, which they will because that's life. It's the lessons we learn from it and how we get up and keep going, and the lessons that we teach the people around us, especially our kids. You don't get a second chance at that. So yes, try not to stuff it up. And if you're not spending enough time with them now, make the time because it's a choice and it's got to be a priority.

Shivani [00:23:31] And it is all about choices, we talk about leadership, Kylie and that it's not a job title. In fact, leadership is when you have followers, when people want indeed to follow and create and build that legacy that you have laid out. What do you think was so different about your leadership that meant that for seven months you didn't once have to cook, your team did that for you?

Kylie [00:23:56] I think it's genuinely being there for your people. And I think, look, it's a hard balance, right? So, you know, you want to support your people, you don't want to save them so that's a balancing act. But I think leadership for me and look, there'll be plenty of people out there saying, you know, she got things right and she got things wrong. But I think I was always there for the people. I knew their kids' names. I'd always write to partners of our staff and or ring them at Christmas and thank them for the support. Without those family units, we were nothing as an organisation and I think that authenticity around trust. So I would never ask someone in the business to do something if I hadn't set that expectation from the beginning. So, you know, a dialogue I would always use is I'm going to ask a lot of you, but I will give you the very best of [gestures to hypothetical list]. We may not be the best mates at work because we got to a stage where, you know, you got a couple hundred people. It's hard to be friends with everybody and that's the hardest thing about leadership I think, is learning that you got to be far enough in front and have a great relationship, but you can't be friends with everybody that's my personal belief. But tell you what, I'll be here if you need me and we'll support you but just let's work together. You're clear on your expectations because I've outlaid it from the interview, induction, one-on-ones. What do you need from me? What aren't I doing right? How do I best lead you? How do you like to be held accountable? How do you like to see your professional development? Do you like to be praised in public? Do you like me to pull you inside internally? Do you like accountability? Do you not like accountability? Do you need flexible work hours? To get the very best from your people, you've got to understand what makes them tick. And I think for me that was probably something that I was lucky enough to get right in leadership again, because of how I was raised. It didn't matter where people came from, you know, what their background was. Mum and dad always said everyone's opinion mattered and everyone deserves to have a voice. And I carried that through to leadership, and I think that's served me well.

Shivani [00:25:55] Kylie, you've just given us such incredible advice, I want more. I'm suddenly feeling like I'm in this really greedy position where I've had the best chocolate bar of my life, and I am just going to keep consuming it. So, Kylie, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. What sage advice, aside from everything that you've already just told us, can you leave for us in the Toolbox?

Kylie [00:26:18] Look, probably the one thing that has had the biggest impact on leadership for me is asking our people, if you were me for the day, what would you change, start doing or stop doing to improve our client experience internally for our people or externally for our customer? And the best ideas, concepts, brain explosions, whatever you call it, have always come from our people that have enabled me to scale and make business successful. It has not come from me. It has come from our people. So ask the question.

Shivani [00:26:48] That's a very generous and altruistic response, Kylie. I've taken pages and pages of notes of the advice that I have garnered from you. So I'm going to in the heart of giving back a little bit of your own inspiration. Here's what I've gotten from you, Kylie that resilience is key. Resilience is growth, and resilience comes from self-care that success model comes from sleep, nutrition, development, all of those things that we should actually pay attention to. And if we do that, we will have the strength and the vitality to use our voice. Our voice are two things that are said and unsaid. And when we use those in the correct balance of power, we're able to lean into our curiosity, build on our collaboration, which will strengthen our networks. And if we do that, we're able to work with people and support them, not save them and know when we get feedback from others. It is just as important that we seek the right people, because feedback isn't about getting it from everyone, it is about the people that matter and the voice that matters most of all is your own. Kylie Walsh, thank you so much for joining us today at Leading Women.

Kylie [00:27:57] Thanks so much for having me.

Fiona [00:28:00] 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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