



**Leading Women podcast**

**CommBank Women in Focus**

**Episode 6: Sheba Nandkeolyar, Founder & CEO MultiConnexions Group**

**Hosted by: Shivani Gopal, CEO and Founder, Elladex**

**Interviewee: Sheba Nandkeolyar, Founder & CEO MultiConnexions Group**

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

Sheba Nandkeolyar, Founder & CEO MultiConnexions Group, finds success by identifying opportunities amongst challenges. Sheba is a champion for women's participation, with a propensity to bridge cultural connections and lift others up as she leads with inclusivity.

---

**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 inclusive and refreshing chat with a multifaceted leader driving women's participation that makes economic sense. Sheba Nandkeolyar is the founder and CEO of MultiConnexions Group with an impactful board portfolio, including her pivotal role as President of the International Advertising Association Australia. She is a luminary, a conduit and a mentor in multicultural marketing and across the Australia-India bilateral business landscape. You'll get lost in Sheba's storytelling and find yourself uplifted by her simple yet powerful advice to put one hand up and ask for more as you extend the other out to help other women rise, before bringing them back together to applaud your impact and celebrate your wins. Sheba, welcome to Leading Women, it is so wonderful to have you here today.

**Sheba [00:02:00]** Thank you, Shivani, wonderful to be here together today.

**Shivani [00:02:04]** And Sheba, I am speaking to you from our studios on Gadigal Country. Where are you joining us from?

**Sheba [00:02:10]** I'm actually also joining you from the Gadigal Country and it is very much Sydney, Australia, so pleased to be here today.

**Shivani [00:02:17]** It's going to be an enlightening conversation because Sheba yours is a transformational and diverse leadership journey. Can you share your leadership path to here, please?

**Sheba [00:02:27]** Shivani, I actually migrated to Australia in the year 2000 and much like many new migrants, I didn't really think I was going to land a job at the level of seniority that I had. So I just went through the very much the same path that very many migrants went through, where they were told you didn't have local experience. It didn't matter even if you did have international experience in those days. Things have changed a lot now but that was my path. But I think what I would say really helped me was a very positive mindset and also a mindset that I want to be flexible, I want to learn, and I want to see the best of Australian work ethics, which I can integrate into my own work ethics. And I think that played a pretty key role in me settling down into this country and getting the best of both the worlds, I would say in my leadership journey too.

**Shivani** [00:03:24] It's a positive mindset, but it's also a shifting mindset from "I want, I want, I want, I want this job, I want to go back to the position that I was at," as opposed to just saying, "I want to see the best of what Australia has to offer, and I want to see what I can contribute to it."

**Sheba** [00:03:40] I think, absolutely, Shivani, and you know, what I loved absolutely about Australia was the fair go dictum and it was amazing the way people were so open, ready to help you and to a certain extent, I do find it quite strange when people say there's a lot of discrimination, because I think a lot of it exists in your mind. And if you're open and you have a flexible mindset, flexible way of working and wanting and open to new ideas and new people, it's a very different world altogether.

**Shivani** [00:04:11] Well, it sounds like in your flexibility, you've gone through many roles. What roles shaped your leadership most?

**Sheba** [00:04:18] I would say, definitely being in the space of advertising and marketing, because you are dealing with consumers, you are dealing with customers, you are dealing with clients, you're dealing with businesses, so many different industry stakeholders that you're in the midst of everything that is happening. So I would say, you know, my role in the marketing and advertising field definitely played a very important role. Simultaneously, the fact that I was in the diversity space, which said that, okay, one size does not fit all, and therefore diverse audiences need to be targeted and made sure that we are sensitive to their cultural values, their upbringing and roots too. I think that was another important one when it came to leadership in the diversity space. The second one, I would say, is my passion for the bilateral business relationship between India and Australia played a very strong role in the bilateral business space, where I could sense that, you know, there's so much of stuff happening in India, especially in terms of innovation, entrepreneurship, digital transformations that can actually really impact the two countries in a very win-win situation in the business world, too. So I would say these two experiences have been quite critical in my journey in this diversity leadership role.

**Shivani** [00:05:46] Sheba, within the incredible golden threads of your career, a standout theme is how you consistently lead digital transformation across all touch points of your impact. Can you share with us the importance of staying across emerging technology as leaders, and how it's changing lives in your work?

**Sheba** [00:06:03] Definitely, Shivani, I think that's a great question because at the end of the day, you know, a lot of us were actually quite worried about technology and the way digitisation was happening, the business transformation, the digital transformation in the business world. Everybody was worried, you know, jobs would go, where am I going to be in this world? But, you know, I think pandemic and the COVID taught us a huge lesson that digitisation is here to stay, and digitisation is actually going to be good for you in your personal life as well as your professional life. Can you imagine how many employees, how many young mothers, how many people who wanted to contribute and work offsite actually got that opportunity to do so? So I saw digitisation and the transformation that happened during that time as a huge way forward in the way not just a business operated, but also in your personal life. How suddenly you had more time for your family, more time for your children, and you were a lot more productive, a lot more happier giving back to your work space too. So I think that kind of was a really good one for me when it comes to technology and the way things went forward really, Shivani.

**Shivani** [00:07:18] As you were saying that Sheba, I was reflecting on my day yesterday where I finished three back-to-back meetings. I had five minutes spare and I was able to go change my child's nappy, have a quick cuddle, come back and jump straight back into Zoom and not skip a beat. You are so right when it comes to digitisation and how it has a personal and professional impact, but it also has a macro impact as well, Sheba, you've got some of these lessons in speaking to the CEO of India's National Stock Exchange?

**Sheba** [00:07:46] Absolutely, you know, and this is where I really want to share that, you know, the digitisation and the business transformation in terms of more adoption of digital technologies and platforms are actually really changing the world in a very massive way and in a good way, I would say. Let me start with a little example, a little incident that happened very recently in India when I was there, and I had forgotten to get a bunch of flowers as a gift for somebody who I was meeting. And I literally had ten minutes to drive to this place. And I asked the driver, do you think there might be any good flower shop? He said, no. Then he said, he looked at me and he said, why can't you buy something

from one of the roadside flower stalls? I said, why not? Can you take me to one? Within a matter of two minutes we found a roadside flower stall. Guess what, they had amazing flowers but what really impressed me, Shivani, was the adoption of digitisation even at that level. You know, when I went to pay him, he just said, just show me your phone and let's do it. It was a Upay straightaway. And I said, are you okay with that? He said that's all I do. I don't accept cash anymore. And you know what, I just could not believe it, imagine vegetable vendors, flour stallholders, people straight there, they're out in the street in a country like India so evolved in terms of the digital technology. So let me come back to the fact that, when I met the CEO of India's National Stock Exchange very recently, he was at a visit and we had a round table, which the AIBC [Australia India Business Council] and the Consulate General of India, Sydney's office had organised. One of the things that stuck to me when I was in conversation with him was, which are the future growth areas that he can see happening between both the countries and definitely also in India and Australia. And one of the things he predicted was massive growth in technology and AI that would impact economies a lot more than the traditional sectors of growth that has been happening. You know, whether it's like when we look at Australia, we think of mining, we think of, you know, resources, natural resources that we have been gifted with and a bit of education, but to have AI and digital transformations happening. And today, when you look at it with a health sector, whether it's medicines, pharma, education, now, it's actually crept into pretty much every single industry that you can think of.

**Shivani** [00:10:23] Every single industry, and also driving women into more start-ups and innovation, Sheba, you've got loads of stories around this, I hear.

**Sheba** [00:10:32] Oh my gosh, you just got me started. I tell you, the amount of start-ups, innovation, entrepreneurship that I'm seeing on a daily basis, literally not just in Australia but also in countries overseas, is amazing. And in my role as National Chair of AIBC and also as a former DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs] board member on AIC [Australia-India Council], I used to visit India quite often, and I still continue to do, where we do look at opportunities in terms of bilateral business between the two countries, entrepreneurship, and how we can really build a closer relationship between the entrepreneurs between the two countries. Now, one of the start-ups that I visited was amazing, and I'm referring to it because it was led by women founders. The founders, there were four founders between the age of 22 and 28. They were young as. IT, health doctors, paediatrics, and I think one was a businessperson. They were doing some amazing work on a digital platform, trying to see how they can predict genetic deficiencies in babies through a product that they were actually evolving and working on. And it just blew me over and I said, look, I'd really love to see if we could get you involved with one of the Australian organisations for funding or as an equity partner. And they said, well, you know, some of the universities from US were already here. And, they picked up the equity stake and I was like we in Australia have to move much faster in order to be a part of this entrepreneurial success that's happening across the world now.

**Shivani** [00:12:16] Because women indeed are driving it and you too are one of those women, Sheba, because you're also involved in launching nanotech products to empower disadvantaged groups in India.

**Sheba** [00:12:28] Oh my gosh, I have to say that is my absolutely favourite pet project at the moment. I had been thinking a lot how to actually create something, which is good for the society. So when you are in business, you land up just thinking of profits, revenue, profits, revenue, how does my bottom-line look? But does it really give you the satisfaction of being able to see how and where you can actually move the dial in terms of doing things for the more underprivileged in society? So in that role, I mean, I have kind of, contributed vastly by helping Salvation Army, the Red Shield appeal that they have over the years, we drive their launch. But more recently, over the last few years, we've worked with a couple of nano scientists to create a special nanotechnology product, which is going to actually be in the area of clean drinking water for infants. You know, the more we researched, we found the number of infants that died in countries because of lack of clean drinking water and children who actually grew up, because of the lack of clean drinking water, had serious health issues, you know. So what we thought is, how about doing something in this area to tap on renewable energy, solar energy, the nanotechnology, and create a clean drinking water product, which then would be readily available for villages and underprivileged women and infants really and I'm coming back to women again. I am looking at launching, it's coming together very beautifully now, Shivani, I'm very pleased to say that we are almost ready, and we would probably be ready to launch by the end of year. This year itself, and the first launch country we've selected is India. And you'll ask me why because again, we want it to

actually be obviously of Indian origin and background. I wanted to see how I can give back to the community again in the country. And what appealed to me was PM Modi's vision of clean drinking water for all by 2024. So we try to link into that and see how can we release this product in Indian villages and by the way, totally free. We are not going to have any of the villages charging for this product. But what I do want to do is the business model will be that we will try and get some of the CSR budgets to fund this, and help the villages around them to lead a cleaner life, a more healthy life, and give an equal chance to everyone, Shivani.

**Shivani** [00:15:02] I can't think of any company that wouldn't want to be involved in that and if that doesn't meet the two definitions of ESG, I don't know what actually would. Such impactful work, Sheba and we will very keenly be following your progress and doing everything that we can to support you.

**Sheba** [00:15:17] Thank you. Thank you, Shivani.

**Shivani** [00:15:20] Sheba, every aspect of your leadership crosses the essential theme of empowering women and enabling women's participation in work. There's a lot of talk that if we just increase women's participation now by 25%, by 2025, we would have over \$30 billion worth of increases in the Australian economy. In your view, are we lowering barriers swiftly enough? And what are some great examples that you're seeing in activating women's participation?

**Sheba** [00:15:48] Thank you, Shivani, you just absolutely focused on something that I love. Gender diversity is very real to me, very special to me. And it's something that, I realised that I have actually been very focused on how to contribute towards women's empowerment at a very early age. When recently, when I visited India and my mother, going back to another personal example, my mother said, by the way, did you know you had published this article a few years ago? And I said, what's this article? And I realised at the age of 21, I had actually written an article about women's empowerment in India, which was actually published in the Indian Management Journal. And it really ties in with what you have just asked me because I think with women there are a couple of things. Number one, we know that if we empower them, we get them into the workforce. And this is established research that definitely the GDP of any country will increase anywhere between 1% to 2%, if not more. Women are so natural in terms of their productivity and the way they connect with what the final outcome needs to be, whether be it in a family situation or in a business, they have a natural EQ and a natural IQ, which they combine so seamlessly to get some of the best business as well as personal outcomes in their life. And I would say, Shivani, my tip for women would be that don't hold yourself back. Just live your confidence. Live your ability. Even if people do not ask you, just raise your hand and ask for more, you know, raise your hand and ask for that role. If you don't do it, nobody else will and believe me, at the end of the day, it all works out really well when you raise your hand and you want more. So that would be definitely the way I would see women getting more empowered and coming forward to contribute.

**Shivani** [00:17:50] Sheba, we've heard so many incredible examples of how you are enabling and empowering women across so many communities. When has it been a time focusing back on you that you have personally raised your hand and asked for more?

**Sheba** [00:18:04] Can I say something here? I actually did not raise my hand when I should have raised, and this was right at the beginning of my career. It was quite interesting. I had joined the McCann World Group. Fortunately for me, I am a natural and a very eager learner, and I tend to be like a sponge. I look out for people and I always tell women do that there's no harm in looking at where you can pick up more tips to do better, more you can pick up, the better it is for you. And life is a constant learning process. But I do remember early in my life it may have been just about six months down the line, I was actually invited into the CEO's room and said that, look, you are going to be taking over the role of your manager. And I was absolutely petrified because I said, how can that be? Number one, in my MBA school, he was my senior. Number two, he's a great guy. He's really delivering and I cannot afford to do that. No, I cannot take this position. And I remember my CEO telling me at that time, the chairman wants to meet you. And I was straight into the chairman's room and he said, you know what, Sheba? We really had great hopes of you. One day you would lead this company as a CEO. But you know what, you lack something. And I said, what is it? He said, you lack the killer instinct. If I were in your position, I would have taken up that role and move forward. But you know what? You lack the killer instinct. I said, well, if that's what you think that's what it is. But my work will speak for itself, and my clients will speak for what I do. I walked out of that room. Believe me, Shivani, I did not take up the position, nor did I raise my hand. But I think for a lot of women, what is important is you stick to your

moral values. I just didn't feel good about it. You stick to your moral values. You stick to your work ethics. You do your best and believe me, it will work and it did. They were my clients who kept coming back and saying, we want her. We want to give more budgets. We want her to handle it. So what I would say is, yes, raising the hand is important, but raising when and how is also equally important.

**Shivani** [00:20:18] It also seems like that is a classic example of someone using a male style of leadership and using that as a benchmark for your success. And a lot of women don't have killer instincts. As you said, we have natural EQ as much as we do IQ, and women may not have a killer instinct, or we may not define ourselves as having a killer instinct. We have an instinct to grow and to enable and to empower ourselves and others, just as you have exactly done. Sheba, in talking about women's participation at work in your own, you've actually identified that Australia is also facing a critical skills shortage.

**Sheba** [00:20:54] Absolutely and we see it in the news every day, we are reading in the newspapers. The ministers are talking about it. When I go into social media, I see so much of information and people talking about the critical skill shortage and the critical skill shortage is in very many industries. So it's not just the IT and engineering or the health, but it's also in agriculture. It's so many other places where critical skills just, I don't want to equate it only to engineering or IT. It is in so many different areas. But having said that, yes, IT engineering, health, these are very specialist industries where the skills are really in short supply. And if we had more of such skills seriously, we would have been in a much better position here in Australia. Now, on that context, I have to say I was very, very privileged in being invited by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. They have a conference, which they hold every second year, which is the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which is the global NRI conference where Prime Minister Modi actually invites global NRIs to come in and share their perspectives. It's a huge conference. This particular conference was attended by more than 5000 or 6000 people, if I remember. And leaders from all across the country and they had requested me to speak, I spoke on I think it was global mobility and critical work shortage as well as the Indian workforce. How does it all come together? And I did speak about the fact that India has so many graduates, engineering, doctors, others that even if they migrate, there will be 10,000 more arriving the next day. And this is really going to be literally the marketplace for recruitment for critical skill shortage. I see Australia and India and, you know, I have worked on the CECA [Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement] over the years and I'm so happy that it's all the relationship is coming together really well where there's going to be more opportunities for very critical skill shortage people from India and from a few other countries too, not just India, to be able to come to Australia and contribute to the Australian economy. So very upbeat about it, Shivani, very upbeat.

**Shivani** [00:23:13] And I couldn't think of anyone better to talk about opportunities and the importance of migration to Australia than you, Sheba. You've touched on women's diverse roles and contributions across our conversation today. I'd love to dive deeper into this perspective. How do we create societal shifts in how we portray women in the different roles they're playing, and link it to value and contribution?

**Sheba** [00:23:38] Let me start from the family perspective. I think it's very important for us to bring up our children, and especially boys, to understand that this world is an equal playing field. Nobody gets an advantage just because you are born as a boy, let's say. Girls and boys are absolutely equal. When I was in T20 as a brand champion that's what we spoke about. It is an equal playing field. Number two, once we have boys brought up in that manner you'll suddenly see they'll grow up to be men and young men, who will think differently already. Coming back to the office situation, you know, you picked up that, you know how sometimes decisions can be very male-driven and this is where I think we need to start looking at things a little bit differently and give it context. For example, I remember in fact, quite interesting, I was having some recruitments and there was one woman who was outstanding, but she was actually pregnant. And she had quite frankly told us she was three months pregnant. And the first thing after the interviews, they removed her and said, oh, well, let's remove her because she is three months pregnant already. I say, hang on, she is my first candidate and said, what do you mean she is your first candidate? But she's going to go away in another 7 or 8 months. And I said, doesn't matter. In those six months, I can see this woman doing brilliantly and turning the dial for our company. And she did, I had my way, Shivani. We recruited her and guess what, not merely she turned the dial, but she actually equipped 3 or 4 more people who were working in that department to think differently, think productively, and think more profitably before she left.

**Shivani** [00:25:33] Isn't it incredible when you have advocates internally at the decision-making table, who can actually sponsor in other women? Sheba, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. What sage advice can you leave for us in the Toolbox?

**Sheba** [00:25:49] In the Toolbox, my advice and tips would be what worked for me, Shivani. Number one, never underestimate yourself. Number two, you have to put up your hand and ask for more. Nobody is going to offer you. You'll have to look after yourself. Number three, please celebrate your success. Women tend to underplay their wins. They tend to underplay their achievements. Please don't do that. I'm not saying blow your trumpet, but I am saying put it in context and celebrate what you have achieved. Finally, try and reach out and help other women because please share your experiences so that they in turn can also rise and in turn can help others. This is the only way we can go forward.

**Shivani** [00:26:37] Sheba, I feel like we're so aligned because as you were saying that you were speaking right to my heart. In fact, my hand is sitting right on my heart at the moment, and I have the beautiful opportunity to also have a bit of an advice wrap of what I took away from the conversation, funnily enough, I numbered it too, so here's my top four. Number one, everyday problems are also big problems that we can uniquely solve by thinking differently by using our power of diversity of thought, just as you've done. Two, get outside of yourself and think globally and you can do that just by brainstorming, it's another form of networking and through that you could build businesses, empires, change lives, change the lives of babies and more. Number three, do good. Use your talents for good for helping you and helping others. And finally, four, raise your hand and ask for more. We back these for so many other women, but it is so important that you do it for yourself. You can and you must and if you think you don't have the energy, just channel Sheba. Sheba, thank you so much for joining us today at Leading Women.

**Sheba** [00:27:44] Thank you so much, Shivani. You've summarised it so beautifully, absolutely, beautifully. I couldn't have done it better and thank you also for the great conversation we had. To be able to have the opportunity to share some personal experiences, which doesn't really happen every day. And also thank you to CBA and Women in Focus for this wonderful opportunity to be able to talk to everyone.

**Shivani** [00:28:06] Well I think I can speak on behalf of all us, when I can say, we are fangirling you, we love you and this conversation and we will be cheering you along the way the entire time.

**Fiona** [00:28:18] 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.