



Board Level podcast
Australian Institute of Company Directors, powered by CommBank

Episode 12: Regional Australia's vital voice on boards.

Hosted by: Catherine Fox
Interviewee: Su McCluskey and Hannah Wandel

Featuring:
Rebecca Warren, GM Strategy and Transformation, CommBank.
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This episode, Catherine interviews Su McCluskey and Hannah Wandel. Su is currently Commissioner of the National COVID-19 Advisory Board, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and a Director of the Australasian Pork Research Institute, the NSW Marketing Board and the Australian Unity Limited. Hanna is the acting Executive Director, Drought Policy and Programs of the National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery Agency, CEO Advisory Panel Member of the Commonwealth Bank and the Chair and CEO of Country to Canberra..

Rebecca [00:00:03] Hello and welcome to Board Level, the podcast that's changing the conversation around boardroom tables. Board diversity and gender balance make sense. It delivers better outcomes for shareholders, consumers, employees and the community. I'm Rebecca Warren, General Manager of CommBank's Women in Focus and we're proud to support the AICD in this valuable conversation. As a board member myself, I know the challenges and the value of contributing at this level. We all have a role to play in improving both equality and diversity. So let's level up with your host, Catherine Fox, award-winning journalist, author, presenter and leading commentator on women in the workforce.

Catherine [00:00:49] Welcome to Episode Twelve and an open conversation with two remarkable women joining us remotely. Su McCluskey from Yass in New South Wales and Hannah Wandel from Port Lincoln in South Australia. They both built diverse board careers from regional Australia and they talk about the importance of being resourceful, innovative and making a vital contribution through leading in times of crisis and uncertainty. Thank you both for joining us. Su, you've lived in a regional area most of your life. How important is that in shaping your priorities and values?

Su [00:01:24] **Well, I guess living in a regional area gives you a different perspective. One thing I'm always very conscious of, particularly as I do a lot of work in the cities, is to help people understand in the cities that when it comes to the regions, they are very diverse. One size doesn't fit all when it comes to solutions. So it's really being able to think about what I call place by solutions and places actually really important there because Australia is really diverse and that's not just across states, it's within localities. Local leadership is really strong and for me being out, I live in a regional area and work in a regional area because I also run a property. It means I have that perspective and I can bring that practical sort of knowledge around the table. When you think of it particularly sitting on boards, you know, we have the ability to be able to impact people's lives right across the country. So it's actually important to get those perspectives and being out to get it from someone who has that firsthand experience is really important. So I'm really pleased I'm able to bring that.**

Catherine [00:02:31] Yes, it's fantastic, Su, how much did that, therefore, frame your career, if you like, because it is so important to get that perspective. You've transitioned into a sort of a very full board career. Did you imagine that was where your career would go?

Su [00:02:45] **Well, it's actually quite interesting because when I first looked at board appointments, I was particularly conscious to not take up agricultural appointments simply because I didn't want to be placed**

in a particular box, I guess and even though that was where a lot of my experience came from, I had a much broader experience. So my first, I guess, bigger board position, certainly when I stepped down from a full-time executive career was with Australian Unity in the areas of aged care, home care, retirement, living, wealth and banking. So that certainly gave me a really broad diverse perspective that allowed me to actually not just be placed with someone that even though I come from a regional background, it's not just about agriculture.

Catherine [00:03:37] Yes so not being pigeonholed because of that but actually making a virtue out of the fact that you have that broad spectrum of knowledge and skills.

Su [00:03:46] Yes and I guess it's not that common, you know and particularly when you look at a lot of boards and when I say, you know, some of the more metro-based boards, it can be difficult to get people with a regional perspective and someone that has an understanding how things work outside the city, which, you know, can range from everything from connectivity and technological challenges to just distances between places that you need to travel. So, you know, there are a lot of different perspectives that come from that.

Catherine [00:04:22] Oh, yes and absolutely essential, I just wanted to take you back, in fact, to the first time you joined the board. Tell us about how did that come about?

Su [00:04:31] Well, my first board appointment, it was agriculture. It was to the Campus Show Society and I think it was because I had a finance background and I was also the general manager of policy at the National Farmers Federation at the time and that certainly helped, you know, and I'd been an exhibitor with the Canberra show and so I'd had an involvement there and that was really interesting for me. I'd never actually planned necessarily to have a board career. In fact, when I stepped down from an executive role, I thought I would just take time to perhaps spend more time on the farm but, you know, I was approached by Australian Unity, I think primarily because of the role I played on the Harper Review of Competition Policy, which, you know, particularly in the area of Human Services had, I guess, brought me to the attention of different sectors and other people. I actually, through that process, developed a real interest in social policy and even though I'm probably primarily considered an economic policy person, for me, there was a challenge in trying to balance both social and economic policy to get the outcomes you want. So being able to join that first board, you know, that first big board, which was the board of Australian Unity, meant that I was now involved with a whole range of different areas and that diverse range of areas has really stretched and excited me and they led to a number of other board appointments.

Catherine [00:05:54] So did you have a network would you say at that point that allowed you to kind of get a bit of advice and understanding of what would be required of you on a board?

Su [00:06:03] It wasn't a big network. I have to say, you know, I certainly talked to a few people that I knew and, you know, a couple of people who were already on boards but I certainly didn't have the depth of experience that I now have when it comes to what are the sort of questions you ask when you first start to look at a board appointment.

Catherine [00:06:29] And of course, you learn quite quickly, though, don't you? Of course, you've gone on to have, you know, this array of appointments. Tell us how you manage all of that because we've been talking in this series to a number of extraordinary women and the diary needs to be planned well in advance is what we've picked up.

Su [00:06:49] Look, you know, managing your diary is really important and it's probably the absolute key to being able to juggle all your different roles and sometimes you do get caught out but that's really important. It's interesting because, you know, the skill set you need to bring to your boards, no matter how different they might be, is actually quite similar in terms that you got to be focused. You got to be inquisitive. You've got to be prepared to explore. You've got to be prepared to participate in open and constructive discussion and debate. You've got to be able to listen and respond because it's very much about teamwork around a board table but the actual focus might be different, you know, in terms of the different roles you have. So it's being able to put that different hat on and think about what are the specific issues that I need to focus on and what can I bring that will help to actually take us to the decisions we need to make for this particular board.

Catherine [00:07:50] Yes because it can be quite a diverse range of people around the table of course that goes almost without saying, I guess but that transferable skill set, you're saying then you adjust it at each board that you're on.

Su [00:08:04] **Yes, that's right, you know and diversity around the board table is a really good thing. I think one of my chairmen always says that if you've got a board that agrees then you haven't got diversity because you actually want challenge and you want differences, view but that you have the ability to then be able to come to a decision that everyone's comfortable with.**

Catherine [00:08:25] And is that something that you think that you've learnt more about? I mean that's because that is a real skill, isn't it? To be able to listen, to also be able to contribute but then to make sure that, you know, the board makes that decision and moves ahead.

Su [00:08:39] **Look, it is something you learn and I think it's something that's really important being able to listen and also not just speak for the sake of hearing yourself speak. It's about being able to constructively contribute. Listen to what others say and be able to build on that. I think that's really important and you can see it at times, you know, when people need to be heard. I think a challenge for a chair is really to be out to manage that and that's the other thing that you learn from being on boards, being able to observe how different people around the table respond and participate in that discussion and also how the chair manages that discussion and debate.**

Catherine [00:09:23] Yes, absolutely crucial, actually now so just interested in your experience with the COVID Commission Advisory Board, which, of course, you were appointed to the middle of 2020. A crisis, without a doubt, how has that unfolded? What are you picking up? What sort of new skills, I would say at this extraordinary time?

Su [00:09:46] **Look, I would have to say that this particular role is unique. It is a really wonderful opportunity to be able to provide business insights and perspectives directly to the prime minister and of course, the prime minister and the government have a whole range of different views but this is actually listening to what business is saying so that we can give the practical aspects of how some of the solutions that they're coming up with will be implemented. You know, I've worked in government and I know that in government you've got a lot of people who can work on really good policy proposals but it's getting that practical aspect in terms of how things will work in practice that's really important. In times of crisis like we have now, you don't have the time to be able to put something in place and say, let's see how this goes. You have to have a greater level of confidence that you're going to put something in place and it's actually going to work and it's going to make a difference and it's going to respond to the challenges that you're trying to fix and of course, with COVID what we've seen is that we thought that we would be moving into a recovery for businesses much sooner than what we actually have done and particularly in Victoria. So there has been more about responding to the crisis and what that means for businesses and then there has been a need to take different approaches as well, depending on which part of the country businesses are operating in. You know, we also have the cross-border challenge as well.**

Catherine [00:11:23] Yes, of course, and your expertise as a woman and a woman who's based in a regional area is invaluable. I'm very glad that you're there. I wanted to ask you now, what's the one thing you wished you'd known when you started out?

Su [00:11:39] **Now, this is going to sound really interesting but it's hard to say no and in saying how to say no to that during due diligence, I think I mentioned when I was asked to be on my first board, I didn't you know, I talked to a couple of people but I didn't really know about all the questions I should be asking. Importantly, not just whether from the company's perspective, I was the right fit, but whether it was the right fit for me. I think this is a really important thing for people to think about when they're looking to take on board roles is the due diligence is about being able to ask the questions, probe the company but really ask the question of yourself, are you going to be the right fit? Are you going to be able to constructively contribute? Will this just look good on your portfolio? If it's just going to look good on your portfolio that is not the reason that you should be saying yes to a board position. I have to say, you know, being on different boards now, it's more about me seeing how new directors come on and undertake their diligence that I still am learning and adjust the way that different people probe and**

sometimes you feel that hang on, why are you interviewing me? Shouldn't I be interviewing you but in actual fact that's exactly the right thing that a new director or someone who's being invited to come onto a board should be doing because there has to be that good fit. You know, there have to be questions you ask about does the role aligns with your values? Are you going to be stimulated and challenged? It's not just about whether you have the time or interest. It can be difficult because it can be very tempting, particularly if it is your first or second board role. Well, you've been trying to get on board for a while and you do get an opportunity but it is a balance that it's not just about getting your foot on the wrong but it's also about for a range of reasons. I can assure that you don't do any justice to both yourself and your organisation but that it is actually very constructive. So I think that's what I'd set out, what's one thing I wish I knew and I'm still learning in that regard.

Catherine [00:13:59] Fantastic, thank you, Su. That was so beautifully put, how to say no. I think a very important life lesson. Hannah, the Country to Canberra Program you set up, can you tell us about why you set that up and what it's been achieving?

Hannah [00:14:14] Absolutely, so I grew up in a little town in regional South Australia called Blyth on a farm and I absolutely loved it. I truly believe living in regional, rural and remote Australia is an asset and something that really should be celebrated but what I also noticed kind of growing up was that there were some additional challenges that kids growing up in the country were facing when it came to distance, time, funding barriers and a bit of inequality between the opportunities kids in the country could access compared to their city counterparts. Then when you compound that with some of the gender issues that women face across Australia and especially when it comes to intersectional issues as well, I became really concerned about young rural women. So whether it was sexism, whether it was, you know, terrible issues like domestic violence, whether it was issues like women in leadership. I know growing up I looked at, you know, Australia's federal parliament and there was this huge imbalance between women in leadership positions. I just thought, when you're compounding and putting together these gender and geographical issues, like, look that little bit harder for young women across regional Australia. So I wanted to do something to make sure that we were empowering young women and that we're really supporting them to achieve whatever it is that they want to achieve. So I founded Country to Canberra in 2014 and now we have four incredible programs. So we have a power trip where we bring all these young women out to the national capital to advocate, meet with the prime minister to training. We have workshops in high schools. We have a mentorship program so an online mentorship program and a blog, a team program. We've had thousands of young women go through these programs. I'm really pleased to have seen the impact it's made on their lives, their leadership aspirations, their self-esteem and confidence.

Catherine [00:16:01] It sounds fantastic and often not enough, I suspect there's an idea and assumption, in fact, from people in metropolitan areas that networking is incredibly difficult. I was just thinking, as we speak today, geographic barriers are sort of being dissolved by necessity at the moment, is it actually perversely kind of boosting the capacity of particularly young women in regional areas to actually connect?

Hannah [00:16:25] I think it's incredible and I just want this momentum to keep going. Over the last few years, I've been so excited to see amazing people like Jo Palmer in New South Wales, who created a business to connect regional and remote women to work opportunities. We do have the ability nowadays to use the Internet to connect people to jobs, to networking opportunities, to boards, of course, we do have a long way to go when it comes to Internet connectivity in various regions. The other issue that I'm still concerned about and really want to make sure that we focus on is that we are making sure that regional, rural and remote people are included in those conversations, to begin with. So I think it is partially on the city dwellers to make sure that we are considering how, you know, when we're thinking about this city on the board. Do we have someone with that regional voice? Also, I encourage people in regional, rural or remote areas, just because you live in those areas does not mean that you shouldn't be part of these discussions. Seek out ways to network. Join boards and I think, like Su said, it doesn't necessarily just have to be agriculture, you know, whether it's health, whether it's aged care, child care, energy, whatever it is, everything impacts regional Australia and regional Australia deserves to have a seat at the table. So I think it's on both sides to really make sure that there aren't any sides anymore. We are just all inclusive and those voices are heard.

Catherine [00:17:46] Indeed and being based in a region shouldn't be a barrier and neither should age. You've really shown us the case for having younger women, too, on boards because you joined your first board when you're in your mid-20s. You're still very young. Don't get me wrong. Tell me about that and some of the assumptions that you had to address around being a younger woman on the board.

Hannah [00:18:10] Absolutely, I think I was really eager to contribute. So I grew up with parents who volunteered left, right and centre. I was always instilled with a belief that you need to contribute to the community, to your society. So I just wanted to help out and that's how I started. I had a couple of really important mentors in my life who said, you know, Hannah we really think that you've got the skills and capabilities to assist in and you could do that through a board. I was really nervous sitting on my first board. I really didn't know what to expect. Fortunately, I had incredible training and did some courses but as time went on, I had some great mentors and people who really reinforced my skills and capabilities. It wasn't always easy. There were a couple of times where my youth was seen as something that wasn't to be valued or I was seen as the token young person. I even got introduced once where there was X person who was the legal specialist, another person who was the tax specialist. She is Hannah, she's the young person and I didn't appreciate that because I felt I had a lot more to value but that said, having young people's voices on boards is really important. You know at the moment, we're seeing a situation where young people's employment due to COVID, young people's futures are really, you know, it's a challenging time. It's important that we focus on young people, but also young people have incredible skills when it comes to social media, digital skills coding, a lot of things that we could really utilise on boards. So for me, I felt really eager to contribute. I felt like as time went on, I was offered more and more opportunities. I think sometimes it's just about getting a foot in the door, having a few people that believe in you and it and it continues from there.

Catherine [00:19:54] And is that, in fact, what did happen because obviously, you moved on to a number of other board roles and in fact, you're the chair now of Country to Canberra. So you've transitioned into that role, which is another set of skills too, did that sort of snowball, if you like or were the contacts from having that first board appointment, I imagine would've been crucial.

Hannah [00:20:14] Absolutely, I think Su mentioned, getting approaches. People approach you. I do really feel like sometimes it is about getting the first foot in the door and that networking element is really important. If you can preview capability through your first or second board appointment then it can kind of snowball from there. I think I've really enjoyed transitioning from being the CEO of Country to Canberra, to the chair of Country to Canberra. Personally, for me, it has been exciting for that organisation to build up our strategic governance and, you know, just for me, it's one building a whole new set of skills but also to be able to build that sustainable organisation has been really exciting. So I think for other young people who might be interested in joining a board, it can be one really rewarding but two, it can build up so many skills that will help you throughout your life as well.

Catherine [00:21:07] So what's the one thing you wish you'd known before starting out on your path, albeit at a very young age?

Hannah [00:21:14] The one thing I really wish I knew is it's actually I hope I don't offend anyone. It's actually not that complex being on a board. You've obviously got fiduciary duties and there are a lot of really important things that you need to know and you've got to do your due diligence. You know, there are really important and serious stuff that you've got to deal with it, but at the end of the day, it's about managing well. It's about leadership. It's about ensuring that values of an organisation are being upheld. So I think when I started my first board, then my second board, then my third, I started realising all of this is just common sense. It's about making sure that these organisations are running really well that we're reviewing things. I think if you are running a business right now if you're sitting on multiple committees in your regional community if you're sitting on a range of community organisational boards, it's something that you can transfer your skills into and I think when I've talked to a range and I've talked to tons of young women all across Australia and older women, women that are older than me as well, they say, I couldn't do that. I don't have the skills it all just seems a huge undertaking. I don't know if I've got those capabilities and what I would say is really try to push aside that impulse to enjoy and like really try and appreciate your own work because when you kind of get to the nuts and bolts of what is going on a board, it is about good leadership. It's about good management. It's about being really diligent. I think I have seen so many people across Australia who have those skills. So I think feeling intimidated, it's something that everyone feels but I'd encourage you not to because a lot of people that I've seen have the skills to be able to be on boards and do it really well.

Catherine [00:23:00] That was great, thank you. You know what they say about common sense, though? It's not that common. I would just point out that was a great answer. So I want to ask you both Su and Hannah but I might start with you, Su, do you think the challenges of developing a leadership or indeed a board career from a regional or rural area differ between men and women?

Su [00:23:27] Look, I think that's really interesting because I have seen so many terrific women, particularly younger women, in leadership roles in regional Australia from quite an early age. Look, I do know that Hannah has actually talked about, you know, some of those young women that are doing great things from home. Certainly, you know, accepting the challenges of connectivity but they're really involved. I think with women in regional Australia, it's that involvement in community, you know, that's really important. So whether that's through the local council, through a school, for a local farming body or something else, there are a lot of opportunities to get involved. Where I actually do see there have been challenges is when you actually get appointed to board roles, particularly, you know, roles that might be more national and to be blunt, I think that's where you can still have a bit of the power style of male while there've been efforts to change this on, you know, and I can say being on the New South Wales Rice Marketing Board, where we do have quite a number of women and our previous chair was a woman, there had been conscious efforts to change that. I still think there's a way to go and of course, we know that organisations are going to be much better if they have more diversity. Of course, diversity includes more women. So there's still movement that can be made on it. It's slow that, I think regional Australia has got a fantastic pipeline of women that are ready to step up. It's up to all of us to try and help take that pipeline right the way through so that they can be encouraged and mentor to get that first board role and then subsequent roles after that.

Catherine [00:25:09] Yes, indeed and Hannah, what about you and particularly with younger men and women, what sort of differences do you see there?

Hannah [00:25:17] Yes, totally, I back up everything that Su said and I think a big part of it as well is now I'm sitting here on the beautiful Eyre Peninsula in South Australia and I've got three sisters in their thirties. Often the strain on women at that point of their life is really quite intense. You've got to look at parental duties, school duties, work duties and what I would also say is there are so many talented women in that demographic, whether it's their 20s or 30s. I'd also call on the men to support women, to support potentially their partners or their sisters to go off to some of these opportunities because you also need to make sure that men are taking on a lot of the unpaid care as well to ensure that women have the time and capacity because sometimes it's not about women stepping but really stepping up so much in their lives. There's only so far you can step. So I think that's really important as well. I think the young women across regional Australia, I would really encourage them to get involved in a range of different opportunities that are out there, you know, in the regional and agriculture side. There's a huge amount of committees and boards that are really eager and looking for young people to get involved. So I really encourage young women to get involved in those types of opportunities. I'd also call on men to again, when they are thinking about board appointments that they aren't just thinking of people, you know, over a certain age. Just remember that, hey, young women do have a lot to add in and we'll have a significant impact in the future and will really help your board succeed.

Catherine [00:26:55] Hear, hear to that, you've both had made remarkable contributions to the public sector. You've worked within it. You've also moved onto boards in the public sector. Is that an area where there are really good opportunities for regional women in particular to make a contribution? Su, can I ask you first?

Su [00:27:13] Look, I think for public roles, the government has made a conscious attempt to really not just getting women onto those sort of boards but also making sure that the women come from diverse backgrounds, which is, you know, looking at younger women, looking at women from rural and regional Australia and looking at women that have indigenous backgrounds. So I think the government makes a very conscious effort to try and do this and so being appointed to a government role does actually give you that ability to get that experience but also to be able to play a role where you can bring your experience and expertise to the fore and know that it will be taken on board. Certainly, in the advisory roles to government, you know, there has been that combination of the hands-on practical experience. I've been quite fortunate because I've both worked in government and I have worked in private enterprise. I'm actually able to bring both views and I understand how both operate and I know how the system works, which can be quite challenging for people, for the private sector if they have never worked in government. So I can actually bring to government appointments that sort of balance of knowing how we can sort of bring those two perspectives together to get the best outcome that said, I probably would have to be honest and say I'm better placed to be on government advisory boards than I am to be a public servant. I think yes, I certainly find that my practical experience isn't always a great experience when I'm in a full-time public service role.

Catherine [00:28:52] Yes, well it will indeed it does, I guess, require some planning. What's your observation about the public sector as an avenue for younger women, particularly on that advisory board area?

Hannah [00:29:03] I think the public service and the public sector is fantastic. And again, I think it impacts people all across Australia. The public sector is so diverse and you can really get involved in really anything that you want to. I think it's a brilliant avenue and I think there are some great public sector roles all across Australia. So I really would encourage young people to take a look at that and I think it's a great kind of career path as well. When you really care about your community or, you know, the economy or social issues, it's a great way to give back but also make a living and be able to contribute. So I do think it's great. I'd love to see more roles available across our regional, rural and remote areas, I know there's a push for that as well but I do think it's been a great career choice to me and not necessarily one I'll stay in forever but it certainly is a great way to hone my skills. I think they also are skills that can be transferable over to a board because you have to learn about regulation and finance and legal and whatever it might be so that's also a really cool way to build up your board skills.

Catherine [00:30:07] Fantastic. What's next for you?

Hannah [00:30:09] Well, I've just undergone this really big transformation of leaving the Country to Canberra CEO role and the reason I did that was because I've been, I'm really passionate and I really believe in making sure that there's power transition in organisations. I think it could have been quite easy for me to have just stayed in the way I wrote the next 10 years but I didn't think that's what was true to that organisation or an organisation for young people that support young people. I wanted to make sure that there was a young person in that CEO role and it was really creating a legacy. Then it goes to another young person and actually is a leadership pipeline. The younger regional women but Country to Canberra is a really big part of my life. So I'm really excited to have been able to achieve that and make that transition and really for me next is I'm a senior executive in the public service as well, focusing on drought, which is something I'm really passionate about. So for me, it's really solidifying some of these senior executive skills to continue contributing across Australia but also looking for new opportunities, new board opportunities now that I've had this big transition and indeed touch wood, potentially more time to spend, focusing on building my skill sets across perhaps different sectors but also contributing in ways that I wasn't able to before. So I'm really excited to be able to do that.

Catherine [00:31:31] You certainly seem to be on a terrific platform to pursue all of that. So that's fantastic to hear and Su obviously your dance card is well and truly full but where are you heading, I guess in the next few years? I feel like it's a job interview. Where do you see yourself in the longer-term? What's the blend that you would like to have in your life?

Su [00:31:54] Well, interestingly, I think while COVID has actually made me realise that having more time at home, you know, to work on the farm, to be in the garden, I've actually been really enjoying it. I've been saying for a number of years that, you know, I'm just going to pull back a bit. What it's allowed me to do and it was probably why I was able to take on the COVID commission role because I'd actually pulled back on a number of other things. I had a little bit more time and I knew that I was able to devote to the work that's coming up in the commission. Those sort of advisory roles are not ongoing. So you can really commit yourself into it for shorter periods of time. So I think that I'm just very fortunate, lucky to be in a position where I am able to choose and given that I've hopefully now finally learnt to say no, it does mean that I am saying yes to things that really allow me to not just contribute but also give me a lot of pleasure in the work that I am doing and allow me to have that great balance with what I do outside of, I guess, my professional life. It will be good to have just more facts so I think you can say I found my happy place.

Catherine [00:33:10] Well, that sounds fantastic. I wanted to thank you both not just for your contribution today, fantastic as it's been, but for also being there and representing regional women. It is much appreciated. Thank you so much.

Su [00:33:24] Thank you.

Hannah [00:33:24] Thanks, Catherine.

Joanne [00:33:26] Thanks for listening to Board Level hosted by Catherine Fox for the AICD and powered by CommBank's Women in Focus where we're sharing stories from women making an impact in the boardroom. I'm

Joanne Gilroy, Board Diversity Manager at the AICD. We're helping build the capability of the next generation of outstanding boardroom leaders. Visit [AICD.com.au](https://www.aicd.com.au) to access show notes from this episode and other valuable resources. Subscribe to Board Level wherever you get your podcasts so you don't miss an episode. Leave a rating review and help keep the conversation going.