



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

Episode 7: Leadership on and off the field

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Interviewee: Lisa Sthalekar

Featuring:
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Lisa Sthalekar is a former Australian cricketer and is on the boards of the Chappell Foundation and the Federation of International Cricketers' Association. In this special episode to celebrate International Women's Day and the T20 Women's Cricket World Cup, Lisa talks about how leadership in sports translates to the wider world, what she admires in a leader, changing the inherent bias in cricket language and the growing diversity of the sport.

Rebecca [00:00:04] Hello and welcome to Board Level, the podcast that's changing the conversation around boardroom tables. Board diversity and gender balance makes sense and delivers better outcomes for shareholders, consumers, employees and the community. But with women holding under 30% of ASX 300 positions in 2019, having a seat at the boardroom table can still feel elusive. So we're here to challenge and change this. 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 board 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 [00:01:02] Welcome to Episode Seven of Board Level and a conversation with Lisa Sthalekar, the former Australian cricketer, who's currently a media commentator and board director of the Australian Cricketers Association, the Federation of International Cricket Association and the ICC Women's Committee. Lisa shares what makes a great leader, whether it's in sport or business, why women are playing and watching sport in record numbers and why she's optimistic that kind of extraordinary growth is only set to continue. So, Lisa, how did you become a world-class cricketer? Can you tell us the story?

Lisa [00:01:37] Well, I was born in India but I was adopted by a white English mother and an Indian father. Cricket obviously runs in the blood in both countries but I was daddy's little girl growing up. The fact that I used to follow me around whatever he did, collect stamps, model trains, you name it, cricket was one of them. I used to play in the backyard. My older sister was more inclined just to sit inside. So I was the one that kind of followed in my father's footsteps. He took us to the S.A.G. when I was about probably 7 or 8 years of age. I remember stealing my mother's bed sheets and writing Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi! I remember going to the S.C.G. and that's when they had the hill. So I used to watch all the people get kicked out as well. I had an ice cream. I had hot chips and so joined in the Mexican wave and like, what else? Cricket was it. Then I saw kids playing on a Saturday morning. I said to my father, can I play? He said, girls don't play cricket. I said, really? He goes they're, all boys. I hadn't really noticed. I've just seen kids my age playing cricket. So I went in and joined. He asked the local boys side and said, would my daughter be okay? They said, well, she's going to be the only girl in the whole club. He said, she'll be okay. So off I went to the Under 10s trials. I was so nervous but that's probably where I started and that's where I fell in love with the game.

Catherine [00:03:09] And of course, that was the norm then. It was all boys, wasn't it?

Lisa [00:03:10] Yes, it was. I didn't even know women's cricket existed. I had no inclination that there was a domestic competition that had been going on since the 1930s, 40s that the Australian team was the most successful team within women's cricket, that women played the first World Cup before men. I didn't know any of this. I just liked the game and I just wanted to be Daddy's little girl. It was probably when I was about 12 years of age, the club that I was with, which was West Pennant Hills, Cherry Brook. The secretary was actually dating one of the Australian cricketers. He said, there's a Gordon Women's Club, there's New South Wales reps and I was like, so there's a whole new world. I remember my father taking me to Chatswood Oval. I remember crossing that big rugby field. I said to my parents, I said, I don't want to go. I'm comfortable with the boys. So, every time I kind of got out of my comfort zone, the initial thing was, I don't know if I can do this, so I don't know if I'm good enough. I'm quite comfortable where I am. With the support of both my parents, I was able to make that big journey, which is when you're 12 years of age across the rugby field and to the cricket nets and I guess the rest is history.

Catherine [00:04:31] I guess the idea that cricket could be a career would have seemed almost unthinkable.

Lisa [00:04:32] Even when I retired, it was kind of unthinkable. I was fortunate enough when I came into the Australian team in the New South Wales Open team that I didn't have to pay to represent my state or country. What we had to do back then was obviously juggle full time work and in amongst that, your training commitments. So annual leave was taken on tours. I was working for Cricket New South Wales but I'd have to take days of leave when I was representing that association. Same thing was for Belinda Clark, who was the captain of the Australian team and working for Cricket Australia. So it didn't mean there was a lot of downtime but certainly I was more fortunate than the generation before me. When I retired in 2013, I was ranked number one from a contract point of view and I would get 15,000 a year. Then, now you fast-forward 7 years on and the girls are on triple figures and going close to a quarter of a million, some of them through marketing contracts and the likes.

Catherine [00:05:31] It's a remarkable story. We'll come back to it in a moment. I do want to ask you, as somebody who worked in the area of business journalism, I read a lot about leadership over the years. It's a very common thing to hear that business leaders can learn a lot from sporting teams and the people leading them. It's sometimes a little overstretched. I did want to ask you what you think that they do have in common being a leader of a sports team and being a leader in a business realm.

Lisa [00:06:00] The first thing is normally the leader has some clear goals, a clear direction that either individually or as a group, they want to take the organisation, the team, whatever it may be. They're great communicators. They have an ability to get the best out of people around them. More importantly, they're willing to work with others. There are different types of leadership. I'm sure you've come across it plenty of times from a business sector but in a sporting industry and sporting teams, you've got to find the common goal because you've got passion as well that kind of aligns with it. It's not pure economics. It's not number crunching, so to speak. So there is this passion, this love that is festering underneath everything. You've got to kind of use that to an advantage. Leaders of sport are able to enhance or extract that from everyone else.

Catherine [00:06:57] It is interesting when you think about the language we use in businesses and organisations, often that is sporting language, isn't it? Scoring goals, getting the team together and so on, just on that area of language, it's really important, isn't it, to modify language and in fact, change it to make sure that it is inclusive. I've been noticing this in the way women's sport, even those words actually it's very interesting how that's transforming. Can you give us some examples?

Lisa [00:07:26] Well, a prime example is that I'm in a sport that has been male dominated for hundreds of years, and it's only been probably the last 10 to 15 years that everyone has probably taken a little bit

more notice and tried to make cricket a lot more inclusive. Examples of language in and I'm a commentator so from a broadcast point of view, we're the voice of the game, we play a huge part in educating the next generation. So from just purely cricket terminology, you'll hear batsman. A lot of the time now the word men and the end people go, okay, so a young girl sitting all go, well, that's not me. I'm not a batsman. I'm a batter. You'll hear now current players, male and female, talk about themselves or talk about other opposition batters. It's still the previous generations when they listen to you on commentary. They're quite quick to tell you or batters for fish, all sorts of things. So they're quite quick to put you in your place but the game is evolving. So another thing is men are the match, just go player of the match. It doesn't need to be a woman of the match. So simplifying it, if there is a term that still defines what you're trying to say and it's a gender-neutral term, I don't understand why we don't use it in this day and age.

Catherine [00:08:49] I've often found when people object to those kinds of modifications that you've mentioned already, they say it's trivial and then you turn the tables and start to say that, then, well, if it's trivial, let's talk about that woman, which is very clumsy and people say, oh, you can't do that.

Lisa [00:09:05] That's actually happened on air, one of my fellow commentators goes, batsmen, bat girl, bat woman, what do I call you? I said, just batter. Why? It's pretty simple. We don't need a complicated, same with fieldsman, just fielder. So just little things like that and it's interesting because 2017 was a women's World Cup over in England. There were a lot more female commentators on the panel and female journalists. We got together for dinner and a lot of the English commentators still use the traditional terminology. They said, well, that's what we're used to that's what we've grown up. We said, yes, we understand that. We're not discouraging that but who's going to change it if you're not going to change it, who's going to change it? So then the next generation will go, well, that's what I'm used to. So someone has to be brave enough to go, enough's enough. I certainly think Australian women's sport and Australian commentators in general, male and female, have been better at being inclusive. A prime example is Michael Clarke when in Channel Nine commentary he would say, if there's any boys and girls out there that want to learn how to bat, watch David Warner and what he does. Something like that so it's just that simple adding of a female or young girls makes a big difference.

Catherine [00:10:27] And actually, that's leadership. Right?

Lisa [00:10:28] Correct.

Catherine [00:10:29] It's a fantastic example. I did want to ask you, it's one of those things when we talk about great leadership, sometimes you know it when you see it but it's harder to describe. I just wondered who some of the leaders that you've admired and why.

Lisa [00:10:43] Probably my first captain for New South Wales and the Australian team, Belinda Clark. Now, I came into the Australian team just off the back of the team losing in 2000 World Cup, it was a narrow loss against New Zealand and the team was actually really hurting. They had made some mistakes along the way but I came into that side and as soon as I walked in, it was very clear objectives. This is what the Australian team is going to do. This is how we're going to make sure that in 2005, we're not going to feel the pain and the sorrow that we felt only 6 months ago. If you want to be part of it, you adhere to this and we're accountable to each other. Probably that was the biggest thing that you had players within the group that would give you the encouragement or if you were taking the shortcuts, they would hold you account for that. It wasn't the support staff. It wasn't administrators. It was the playing group. So it was driven internally. Belinda Clark led that. So first, she had a clear vision. She had a way of getting the best out of us. It didn't work for everyone. There were a number of players that came in the side and never played for Australia again. They just didn't cut the mustard, so to speak. She had a way of getting the best out of me, so I had to boot in 2001. When we got to around 2005, her leadership changed as well. There were a lot more younger players, so we started to see a softer side. Halfway through that period of time, she actually asked a few of us, can you give me some feedback on my leadership style? I

said, tactically, you're the best captain. Like you read the game, you stay really calm. It's very easy as a player, if we look at you in you're all flustered, we'll get flustered. So, she was and I describe it as a duck on water, looks very calm but the legs are paddling fast underneath. The main thing is that she was able to find that softer side to realise the best way to get more out of the player is to get to know them as a human being, what's going on around their world, not just on the cricket field and that training because once you start to do that, then you can understand how to get the most out of them.

Catherine [00:13:01] I like your point about leadership changing to the cohort.

Lisa [00:13:08] It has to.

Catherine [00:13:09] These days when you turn on the TV or read something online sports coverage, it's so common to see not only reporting on women playing sport, but, of course, commentators, women, analysis from women, audiences are made up of women, what's driving this growth? We're all watching it and with someone like me, with quite a lot of amazement, actually, it's incredibly encouraging. Where's it coming from?

Lisa [00:13:35] Well, I can just probably talk about it from a cricket point of view. There was a lot of hesitation from the cricket commentary team that should we have a female? Why should we have a female? Obviously, the previous broadcaster was all about past Australian captains and they were all male as well but 2015, there was a change in the landscape of cricket globally. The Indian Premier League, which is the biggest T20 domestic competition in the world, suddenly opened the doors to females being involved in the commentary team. Now, I thought this might be the last place, India, who sometimes hasn't necessarily got their equality rights bang on but what the cricket fraternity over in India realised that if they want to grow the game and if they want to grow the viewership, there's half a population that you're not really appealing to. So they decided that they'd bring 4 commentators. So every night, you had a female voice at some stage throughout the night. What they saw from there was an increase in female audience. Now because India are the leaders in cricket really, as much as England and Australia would like to think they are, at the moment India are. Everyone kind of took notice and went, okay, so there have been more females involved. Obviously the new broadcast rights deal that was done with Cricket Australia, part of their agreement with anyone that signed up was that they had to have females involved. So they were kind of forcing the broadcasters, radio and radio channels to ensure that they had females involved and what it's done now in Australia, everyone's like, great, it's refreshing. It's really nice. There's a bit of banter into the commentary box, which is probably exactly what's happening in the lounge room as you're watching it with your family. We look at the game slightly different. We add a little bit more fun. We talk about fashion, maybe a little bit more shoes or hairdos. It's made cricket a little bit more real. Generally, most of the sports here in Australia, which have been very successful, have been predominantly males. They've realised if they're going to kind of compete with the rest of the other sports, they've got to open the market up and that's why we're seeing a big change.

Catherine [00:15:55] So we're seeing obviously that change at the commentator level, the audiences, because for a long time it was kind of an adage that women wouldn't go and watch other women playing sport and that's been proven wrong. The other thing is what's been happening at the grassroots level? Are girls starting to play cricket in bigger numbers?

Lisa [00:16:10] Well, certainly it helps that cricket is now being seen on TV and that they have role models. Like I mentioned before, I didn't even know women's cricket existed. I'd like to think in this day and age, a 6 to 12 year old female, who's sporty knows that there is a plethora of options for her not only to just play the game but also to potentially become a professional in whatever sport that she chooses from a grassroots level. I probably felt this as well. You go to the local cricket club and there are only male change rooms. It's only male toilets so simple things. It's about just appealing to the other population, just those simple things will make it more inclusive.

Catherine [00:16:58] Again, sort of myth busts the idea that women are sort of unable, biologically, to play these sports, which we now understand, the supply of women also depends on the demand. So, yes, you're quite right. So, Lisa, given all that momentum and change at that grassroots level and so on, what do you see happening with women and sport in the broader context over the next few years?

Lisa [00:17:21] **It's just going to get better and better. We're going to see, and the level of investment that sports are putting into their female athletes. There's probably been some criticism around the women's AFL but give it time and certainly we're going to see some really skillful athletes that are coming through the ranks. So I do feel that we're on an upward slide how quickly we go. It depends on how much money everyone keeps piling in from a viewership point of view, like you said, people are enjoying it and surprise, surprise that they've just needed it to be on TV or accessible or be able to know that things are on. We're seeing a bigger audience and I have a feeling that sponsors will start to realise that females are actually really wonderful role models and ambassadors. They're not in the back pages for the wrong reasons. They're not on the front pages, for the wrong reasons, they're there because of what they've done, their skill, their athleticism. I'd like to think in the next 5 to 10 years that female athletes start to dominate this country because we have been dominating for a long period of time but now it's our time to shine.**

Catherine [00:18:31] It's a wonderful thought, isn't it that visibility will become even more tangible and the repercussions of that. It's very uplifting. Now, of course, the I.C.C. Women's T20 World Cup will be held in Australia this year with the final to take place in Melbourne on International Women's Day.

Lisa [00:18:49] **They're smart, aren't they?**

Catherine [00:18:52] Fantastic trying to break the world record for the most audience at a standalone women's sporting match. Now, if we get there, explain the significance of that globally.

Lisa [00:19:04] **It's going to be one of those moments. Firstly, if we just break it down to Australian sports, where was I when Cathy Freeman won gold? Where was I when Pat Rafter was playing Wimbledon final? Those types of moments in sport that you go, oh, I know exactly what I was doing, where I was. I don't want to miss it. I've stopped doing whatever I need to do to watch it, to go to the event. I do feel that this will be a moment like that. The fact that they've been brave, the ICC and the local organising committee and Cricket Australia to come out publicly and say, we want to break this world record. They could have gone for Adelaide Oval or the S.C.G., which is slightly smaller and still would have created an amazing atmosphere but to try and break the world record, they're saying, hey, here's women's cricket, we're here to stay. You watch the girls, you're going to enjoy it and we're going to break some records along the way. So fingers crossed that we get there because certainly it is going to be exciting. They've put a lot of fanfare around it. Katy Perry's coming out to play, so that should appeal to the younger audience. Once the tournament actually starts, everyone will be impressed with the cricket they see. People are talking from a cricket point of view that this will be the closest T20 World Cup that will ever see.**

Catherine [00:20:28] Very exciting, a real watershed moment. Thank you, Lisa, and thank you for being such a wonderful ambassador for the sport and a voice.

Lisa [00:20:38] **Thank you.**

Rhian [00:20:41] Thanks for listening to Board Level posted by Catherine Fox for the AICD powered by CommBank's Women in Focus, as we change the conversation around boardroom tables. I'm Rian Richardson, Board diversity manager at the AICD, inviting you to visit aicd.companydirectors.com.au, where you can join the conversation, access show notes with all the links mentioned in today's show and discover valuable resources.

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