



**Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

Episode 7: Priscilla Rogers on smashing stereotypes, thriving in risk and infusing empathy into creating real-life solutions.

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai
Interviewee: Priscilla Rogers**

Featuring: Jinny Olney, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank

In this episode Shadé Zahrai interviews Priscilla Rogers. Priscilla is the Director and Co-Founder of DOFTEK, the leading developer of innovative suspension systems for the automotive industry. She is also the Director and Co-Founder of Green Brands, Director of Australia Dementia Network Limited, Digital Health CRC and an Adjunct Professor at the La Trobe University. Priscilla is also Director and Investor of Upstart Innovations.

Jinny [00:00:03] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources you need to activate your leadership. I'm Jinny Olney, Head of CommBank's Women in Focus. And Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we are here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Shadé [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm your host, Shadé Zahrai and today's conversation combined the excitement of delivering vital solutions, the challenges of navigating career junctures and the tactics to thrive in high-risk and high-stakes environments. And what a delight to welcome our guest, Priscilla Rogers, co-founder of DOFTEK and leading woman in STEM, who is passionate about smashing stereotypes and infusing empathy and collaboration in creating real solutions. Thanks for joining us on Leading Women, Priscilla, dialing in from northeast Victoria.

Priscilla [00:01:16] Thanks so much for having me, Shadé. It is really such a privilege to be part of this program. And just a huge thanks to you and the entire Women in Focus team for pulling this together. I just love being part of a community where we can collectively support each other at whatever stage we're at, so thank you so much for having me.

Shadé [00:01:36] Well, we are so privileged to have you. So, Priscilla, you have had one incredible leadership journey. Can you share with us an overview and then we will deep dive into a few of your unforgettable stories?

Priscilla [00:01:48] Yes, thanks so much, Shadé. I think we're all well aware that, you know, our leadership journey starts well before we think it does, well before we think we're a leader or at least recognised as one. And for me, it's been in the context really of entrepreneurship and innovation. When I think back to my very first venture, if you like, I recall being this 10-year-old who just went to cook and felt that everyone needed rocky road in their life. My parents had a small country bakery at the time, so I decided I was going to make and sell these fabulous rocky road. But,

what really amuses me when I think back on this experience was that I was actually selling the product at a loss because I hadn't quite worked out this concept of "cost of goods sold". And I decided that I couldn't compromise on using the best quality ingredients, and therefore expensive ingredients. Think Cadbury back in the 1990s. But all jokes aside, it was really at this point when I started to look for opportunities to create, to take risks and really to learn. Fast forward a few years, I discovered that I really loved science and maths. I had a narrow view at the time of what I thought a career could lead to. So I decided to study engineering, having no idea actually at the time of what a career pathway could look like. In my final year in my university degree, I discovered that actually within health care there was a whole host of problems that needed solving and engineers could do that. They could use their technical knowledge and know-how to develop new products to help both clinicians and patients. That really got me excited. So throughout my Ph.D, [00:03:43] I designed "lab-on-a-chip" [0.8s] diagnostic type devices. And my husband was also an engineer and he was developing new medical devices. And it was in our late Ph.D. that we felt we had a responsibility to take a technology that my husband had developed to take it towards patients and to market. So this is when we started our first real company and we did that together. We couldn't both afford to be in the start-up space. So I decided to join a big corporate being, IBM Research in Australia, and the largest industrial research lab in the world. And within a year of leaving my Ph.D., I was managing a large team of brilliant researchers in things like artificial intelligence, epidemiological modeling of Ebola at its peak, also [00:04:36] brain-inspired computing. [0.8s] And after a few years of that and after our first company was acquired, I decided to go re-enter into the start-up world. This was a tough decision, actually, because I felt like I was really getting the hang of the corporate life. I had the structure. I knew how to maneuver within that environment, and I had a team around me. On the flip side I really wanted to join my husband in the start-up world, where I wanted to really see if I could actually thrive in a more of a high-risk, high stake environment. So I did that and after a year of trying to manage my husband, which neither of us enjoyed, we finally got into our groove. And we've been doing this thing together where we develop and commercialise new technologies, where there's problems that need to be solved. And we usually take our research and development in more of the fundamental stages through to proof of concept of the minimum viable product, at which time a large corporate typically takes that forward. It's not without its highs and lows, but we wouldn't have it any other way. So that's a little bit about me.

Shadé [00:05:48] And what a wonderful story it is, starting from that accidental entrepreneurship journey at the age of 10 with the rocky road. I'd like to buy some of that. So if you can set me up that would be amazing but Priscilla, I love that you highlighted that the leadership journey starts even before we think it does. So often we're thinking it's a position or a title that we gain. But actually it can start even in childhood, just in terms of how we're open to things and how we're taking on new opportunities. And you've really been at the cutting edge of biotech. It's incredible some of the work that you and your husband Jeff have been involved in.

Priscilla [00:06:21] So thank you so much. It's true. I do believe that as younger people, we do develop very critical leadership skills that really come into play later in life. I think the constant desire to challenge and to grow and to be outside our comfort zone is when we have an opportunity to develop those skills. They no doubt benefit us later in life.

Shadé [00:06:46] So, Priscilla, I know that you had a sliding doors moment really early on in your career where you had to make a defining choice. And it was with your husband, Jeff, where you had to make a choice to head down one of two very different paths. And you touched on this briefly. How did you actually approach that decision-making process and what did you learn from that experience?

Priscilla [00:07:06] That's a really good question. The most critical juncture for my husband and I was that time when we started our first company. We were in our Ph.D. We had just completed seven years of study and a very accepted career pathway would have been for us to go into postdoctoral research fellowship roles. Typically you would do that overseas, it's a guaranteed salary. You work for someone else and it's reasonably low-risk. But we had this dilemma where we could see a clear pathway to bring my husband's technology to market and actually get it to patients or at least closer to patients. So I think for both of us and as engineers, we did a really thorough risk assessment. We looked at the pros, the cons, chances of success, chances of failure. And the odds are always stacked against you. In the data, I think it's 95 in fact. We were prepared to take the risk both individually and together on the chance that we could achieve what we set out to. And remember, without taking risks, you're unlikely to achieve your goal. You just need to be very strategic and smart about the risks that you're taking. So for us, it's been really about assessing the risk, hedging the risk, mitigating as many of the risks as possible, and probably most important, to reassess that risk often. If the risk profile goes up and, deep down you know that this has now become an unacceptable risk, sometimes you have to make a really hard decision, go against your emotions and change your path or you're trapped. So in the end, you know, it can be a hard decision. But if you don't make that decision, it can be more costly than changing track now. So that's the key tool that we use in evaluating new technologies, teams and also the market opportunity.

Shadé [00:09:15] And it's really great guidance and advice for women, because we know that as women we tend to be less open to taking big career defining risks. We have a tendency to focus on everything that could go wrong and then that actually holds us back. But I love how you said it's about being strategic and smart. It's not about taking the reckless risk just because we want to exercise the risk taking muscle; we still need to be smart about how we're doing it. And also, you highlighted the importance of continually reassessing that risk because things change and we need to acknowledge that and be ready for that. Now, Priscilla, when I usually have women in STEM who reach out to me, it's often about their struggles being in male-dominated environments. Yet you seem to be one of those rare women who not only gravitated towards male-dominated areas like science, engineering and automotive, but you unapologetically smashed female career stereotypes while still leveraging your innate feminine strengths around empathy and human-centred thinking. So what advice do you have for other women who are in STEM and just in male-dominated industries more broadly to really thrive and deliver their best?

Priscilla [00:10:23] Thanks, Shadé, that's really kind. And I've got to tell you, [00:10:26] I do love smashing stereotypes. Unfortunately, we are still having to do that in STEM, although I think it is improving, which is really positive. Females have enormous capacity to be great engineers, great founders and great innovators. I think all of us are blessed because we clearly gravitate towards technical thinking. But our natural instinct as females with high skills in empathy and social and emotional intelligence really do help set us apart within the field of engineering and in your career. So you often find that women have very strong purpose and vision. It's about the "why" for them. It's

not often about status or money, and we're also very empathetic, like you said, when it comes to understanding our customers, listening to their needs and innovating for them, really human-centred design. So a lot of what I do in innovation is driven by need and, you know, my personal desire to solve problems for people. [71.1s] And to give you a more classic example of this, I recently launched a new business called Green Brands because we're in this era of COVID and infectious diseases. I'm not okay that there are insufficient antimicrobial products that protect people from infection, so think prevention. There's been no innovation in products like hand sanitiser since the 1960s. So I'm not okay with delivery drivers and other essential workers who might be using products like hand sanitisers 30 times a day and having open painful wounds on their hands because the alcohol is drying their skin out. And it's very harsh. But I'm also not okay that there are alcohol-free products on the market that might work in a test tube, but actually are not effective on skin and don't work. So together with three extraordinary gentlemen who have skills that I don't have in other areas of business (because collaboration is really important and again, I think, females do that well), we are coming together to develop a new class of antimicrobial products, that are not just safe, but also highly effective to better protect people. So my advice to the younger generation, to any females wanting to pursue engineering, is to not look at your compassion and your empathy as a disadvantage, but rather embrace that along with your emotional intelligence, to really set you apart and to help whatever venture that you're doing be successful. Research says that for innovation to be successful, you need 50% female, 50% male. So females have a lot to add and I'm really passionate about supporting the younger generation to make this type of impact.

Shadé [00:13:45] And it's brilliant advice, too, around the fact that we need to have a diversity of perspectives at the boardroom table, in the innovation centres, wherever we are in every industry. This is how we reach much better outcomes. And I always find it so sad when you have women who might be at the table, but they're doubting themselves as to whether they really belong. And so they go along with what everyone else is saying, thinking that's the right thing to do so that they don't rock the boat. But then you don't have real inclusion. You're not really leveraging the magic that comes from the diversity of perspective and opinion and viewpoint. And I love that you said don't look at your compassion as a disadvantage. Combine it with your empathy, your emotional intelligence to really set you apart, a really powerful lesson and message for all the women who are with us on this journey.

Priscilla [00:14:36] Exactly, if you are a woman in STEM and you're a young lady, you're the only female in the room, everyone else is at least 20 years older than you. I would say hold your head up high. You have so much to offer and you deserve to be there. Really embrace that.

Shadé [00:14:55] So, Priscilla, when it comes to having a really impactful and energising career, what's your formula for success if you want to be really good at something?

Priscilla [00:15:05] I know it sounds cliché, but I really believe that you need to do what you truly love. I actually believe that passion and success are closely intertwined. And also, it's important to realise that success is different for a technical person. I always try to be very careful about being pulled into an executive or business leadership role. Often, if you're a brilliant researcher, there's a more than likely chance that you're really not going to enjoy dealing with HR or investors or going to board meetings. So therefore, you're probably not going to be that good at it either. So it's so important to find what you love and also to find people that you love to work with. Time is the most

precious commodity. I really believe that for me it's been such a journey being able to work alongside my husband. You know, after a few years of working together, now we know what each of us is good at. We divide time based on what our strengths are. And just to be able to come together and to work effectively is very powerful. Whether that's your husband, whether that's your colleagues at work, it doesn't matter but find people that you enjoy working with so you can really enjoy the journey.

Shadé [00:16:32] That's brilliant, find what you love, find people that you enjoy working with. We also know from psychology that when you're around, people who energise you and lift you up and importantly have high expectations for you, you're more likely to live up to those expectations because you feel supported, because you feel valued. And so it's so important, such great guidance. And just on the topic of you and Jeff working together, I know that this is going to be something that a lot of women are interested in learning a little bit more about. I run a business with my husband, too, so I get asked this a lot. I'd love to hear from you. What are the biggest lessons that you've learnt about leadership, about teamwork that have come from specifically working with the person that is closest to you on this planet?

Priscilla [00:17:16] I think that's a really good question, actually. I've been really privileged to be able to work with my husband because I have so much respect for what he is naturally very good at and the leadership roles that he takes on. So it's very easy to take guidance from him where I know he's strong at. And I think that on the reciprocal side, he'll also look to me and my strengths in other areas and we lead each other. In the early days, I think we did take some time to know what our strengths were and also to respect each other's boundaries and decision-making capabilities. But when you work with someone for a matter of time, you do learn a lot about each other. So it's just really coming together and working effectively. And yes, it's worked out well. Probably the thing I would say, though, if you are working with your partner, it's also finding time to switch off. I'm not sure how you find it, Shadé but I find that work can completely spill over to my personal life and I can be working all the time. So it is important to also share other interests, other than work outside of the nine to five, if you like.

Shadé [00:18:48] Oh, I completely agree with you. You know, it's like you're in the middle of doing your grocery shopping on the weekend and all of a sudden you start discussing a project that you have coming up or a looming deadline or a client you have to get back to. So, yes, creating the work life delineation and still having the integration, definitely important. I really respect the fact that you highlighted the importance of respect and also playing to your strengths. So the fact that it took you and Jeff this time to recalibrate and then continually recalibrate to understand the best ways to work together, because this is the reality, whether it's a husband and wife working together or whether it's a team, a new team, an established team, it's continually recalibrating, making sure everyone feels engaged. And as I always say, it's really about prioritising unity and leaving your ego at the door. And this is obviously more so when it's with a partner or a husband or a wife that you're working with. But even in teams that we have within organisations, within any kind of team environment, it's how can we be the best for the sake of the team? Because our success is everyone else's success and the team's success is everyone's success. So a beautiful little note to leave on around collaboration and respect. So, Priscilla, as you know, here at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. And our unique impact is that each of our amazing guests offers an actionable tool

that's actually ignited their own leadership so that we can add it to our Leadership Toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. So what are you adding for us today?

Priscilla [00:20:19] Very recently I had the opportunity, thanks to Chief Executive Women group, to attend MIT Sloan Business School. And through that program, I was really inspired by two professors, actually, and I'd love to be able to share that research with you. The first is from Professor Loredana Padurean. She has been redefining the way we think about and referred to soft skills, she argues that there is nothing soft about soft skills. This is not a lesser skill compared to hard skills. Instead, she actually referred to them as smart skills. I think it's a really interesting research area. And looking at the semantics of how we refer to these types of skills is interesting. The second is from a professor called Duncan Simester. He explains why it's not enough just to create great products. Instead, understanding the intricacies of how our customers search for products. So I thought for any aspiring entrepreneurs who are thinking of bringing a product to market to read some of his concepts and research. It's very interesting.

Shadé [00:21:34] Thank you so much for a wonderful tool for us to add into the Toolbox. This idea around redefining how we view our skills and how we view what we bring to the table. And I actually love this idea of moving away from this language of soft skills, because you're so right. When we think of soft, we think of something that's not as important as something that's hard and tangible that you can grab onto. But actually, as was shared, it's around redefining it as smart skills, emotional intelligence and empathy. These are smart skills that help us be able to do business and do it better. So, Priscilla, what a wonderful conversation we've had. Thank you so much for dialing in and being so open about what you've been through. I like to call you the stereotype smasher. I love that the consistent theme that came through when you shared it really on is this idea around having a desire to grow and be outside your comfort zone. And finally, the key message that I love that you shared is as women, we need to not view our innate feminine strengths as being disadvantages, because they're not. They're actually the things that can distinctly set us apart. So thank you so much for joining us.

Priscilla [00:22:42] Such a pleasure, Shadé. And I'm just really wishing all your listeners the very best in their own leadership journey. And thanks for listening to my story.

Shadé [00:22:56] What a fascinating conversation with Priscilla, especially around smart risk-taking. It's something I see in women's leadership a lot, which is typically a symptom of imposter syndrome, which completely holds women back from taking risks and instead keeps them fixated on what they lack. And that's all for this conversation, we're looking forward to you joining us next episode. Until then, share this episode with the women leaders you know and let's activate leadership together.

Jinny [00:23:25] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate leadership and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at womeninfocus.com.au and subscribe to Leading Women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review. Spread the word. And let's commit to keeping the conversation going at [#LeadingWomenAUS](https://twitter.com/LeadingWomenAUS)