



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 9: Shadé Zahrai on shifting the focus on women's leadership

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Interviewee: Shadé Zahrai

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

In this special episode, the tables have turned and Jinny Olney, Head of CommBank's Women in Focus, interviews Shadé Zahrai. Shadé is the Director and Chief Positive Influencer of Influenceo Global Inc. and a Member and Contributor of Forbes Coaches Council.

Jinny [00:00:03] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm Jinny Olney, your host for this special episode. Today, we turn the tables to hear from an incredible woman making an impact in women's leadership across the globe. Our very own Leading Women host, Shadé Zahrai. I know you will gain as much as I did from this conversation as Shadé shares her experience, peppered with her research on imposter syndrome, women's tendency to focus on the gaps and what's possible when we play to our strengths. Thanks for joining us on Leading Women, Shadé.

Shadé [00:00:42] Thanks, Jinny; it's really exciting to be here, this time in the hot seat. I've had a good think about the kind of messages that I want to leave everyone with, so I'm super excited to get started.

Jinny [00:00:53] So glad, so Shadé, like all of our Leading Women guests, you've had one incredible leadership journey. Can you share some of your highlights with us before we dive deeper in?

Shadé [00:01:04] Absolutely, I've been having a think about what I want to capture in this, because, you know, when you start to reflect on your journey, there are obviously pivotal moments or really important moments that you want to capture. So a couple of them for me, I started my career in the law. I started working in the law and I had so much imposter syndrome to the point that I remember sitting in the law firm that I worked at, one of the top tiers, it was in Sydney at the time and I would be hiding behind my cubicle because I was afraid of people coming by and getting me involved in cases because I just did not feel like I knew what I was doing. So it was a perfect example of someone in the wrong environment for them. It was one of those moments that I had when I was four years in and I was in the CBD because it was in the CBD in Sydney. It was on a weekend and I started feeling sick as I was walking around and I couldn't figure out why I felt that way. But then when I looked up, I could see my building behind me. And

so my body was telling me that environment was not the right fit for me. I was actually having this physiological response and it's kind of how I felt every morning when I had to wake up and go to work. So I knew very early on, not a good fit. I then moved into banking and finance and I took all of the self-doubt and all of that imposter syndrome with me. It was a completely new environment. I knew nothing about the industry but at that point I just wanted to get out of the law. So it was sort of the best next option. But it was a struggle, those early years in that industry, male-dominated industry, as a young woman who really hadn't found her voice, I really did struggle. Now, interestingly, at the same time as that happening, I was also pursuing a professional dance career, so which was just a fun side hobby. It was a really fun weekend piece that I loved. And, you know, after work, I'd go and we would train and we were competing and performing. And during my dance career, it was like a different world. But I learnt two really important lessons, which then translated into my professional career. So the first lesson was, as a dancer, it's very easy to start comparing yourself to everybody else. And naturally, you're comparing yourself with other people who are better than you and have more experience than you and have been doing it for a lot longer than you. And so all you focus on are all of your weaknesses everywhere that you fall short, every technical ability that you don't have. And I was doing that a lot. But it was when I reached this point in my dance career where I said, you know, I'm going to stop comparing myself because I'm never going to be able to do the splits that was a big thing for me. I could never do the splits but I realised there were other things that I could do. And so my dance partners and I, we would always focus on our strengths. And then we ended up winning three national titles by focusing on strength and not trying to do what we knew we couldn't do and that we knew other people could do better. So that was a really powerful lesson I had. And then the second lesson in the dance world was, you know, we would spend months and months training and rehearsing for competitions and performances. We would spend months and hours and it was grueling. I loved it. I loved the lead up. And then you had about two and a half minutes on stage to do your thing, and then that was it. And so I learnt that if your objective is just to be on stage for that two and a half minutes, it's kind of this massive let down by the time you get there. So you've really got to embrace and enjoy the journey and the process that's what it's all about, not just the kind of the end result. And so these two lessons I realised are actually really important, obviously not just in the dance world but then when you think about how you apply them to your life and to your career journey. So I then started thinking, okay, in my career, I'm now in the banking and finance industry. If I want to succeed, I have to actually take action. I have to stop comparing myself with everyone else around me and just take action to move forward. So I developed a bit of an obsession early on around how to figure out how to create a really fulfilling career in the corporate space. And it actually led to me having a really fast tracked trajectory. I was networking with the right people. I had the right attitude. I was very open to learning and I became very aware of my areas of development and not apologetic about them. I said, yes, I don't know how to do that yet but I'm eager to learn. Let me learn. Give me this opportunity. And it's amazing how when you show up and you demonstrate that you are here for it, people appreciate that and

you're able to get opportunities that otherwise you wouldn't have been able to. So that was the turning point for me in my career and I started getting recognised for things and winning awards and travelling with the CEO and things were just opening up. And the two key lessons that I learnt that really fast tracked that career trajectory was the importance of asking for what you want, being really clear on what opportunities are and how do I get them. And then secondly, actually giving of yourself beyond just your job. So I was really big on volunteering at events or I led one of the employee action groups. I was big on contributing to culture, which I think all of us can understand how much more engaged you feel when you actually feel like you're contributing to something. So that was sort of the experience I had in corporate. And then I reached a point where there were two things happening. I was on this fast track journey, I knew I had a very successful career ahead of me, but at the same time, I wasn't 100% satisfied. I wasn't 100% fulfilled. I also had experiences where I ended up in roles that I was doing well but I wasn't passionate about because they didn't align to my strengths. So I decided to leave. I decided to leave the corporate world. And I now run a company called Influenceo Global Inc. with my husband and I honestly feel like I'm living a dream because we get to do what we love each and every day, which is work with individuals and leaders and teams around the world, helping them elevate leadership, opening up their minds to overcome their self-limiting blocks, and then infusing research-based insights with actionable strategies to help everyone elevate. So very fortunate to be doing that and one of my passions around supporting and empowering women comes from the fact that, well, firstly, I started my career full of doubt and full of imposter syndrome but I know I'm not alone. I came across so many other women not only women early in their careers, even women who had been on it for years. And they had so many self-limiting blocks. And I saw them hold themselves back by not negotiating, by not speaking up, by not feeling ready for an opportunity. And so I'm now very passionate about helping unblock women so that we can help to really equalise what we're seeing in the world of business today.

Jinny [00:07:52] It's like a 360 journey that you've been on, isn't it? And I'm sure many people are nodding their head and can relate to that story. And so where do we start, Shadé, when it comes to women's leadership, you're an enthusiastic advocate of playing to our strengths, which you just mentioned there. Can you share some of your valuable views on this and where you play to your strengths in leadership?

Shadé [00:08:15] Yes, definitely, as you say, I'm a massive advocate of playing to strengths. I experienced the absolute game changing moment that comes when you start to align behind your strengths. And actually, there was a story that I like to share. I share it very regularly because it highlights the importance of why playing to strengths is so relevant for us as women. So I had just made the transition into banking and finance. I was in my first year; I wanted to leave that's how much doubt I had. I really felt like they'd made an error in the hiring process and I wasn't meant to be there. And so I'm in this environment, I'm

having a chat with a mentor and she can see that I'm full of doubt and I'm full of all of these thoughts going on about the fact that I just don't belong. I said to her, Mel, I don't believe I belong here. I don't feel like I have what it takes to succeed. I don't know how to do this. I can't do this. I don't have financial modeling. And I went through this list of all the things I couldn't do. And she sat there and she said, Shadé, why are you focused on everything that you cannot do? Because that's not why you're here, you're actually here because of what you can do. So why don't you shift your focus onto what you bring, your strengths, your qualities and find a way to bring them to life every single day in your career? And this was a huge turning point for me in terms of shifting my perspective because I realised that I had been up until that point focusing on everything I didn't have and looking at everyone around me, comparing myself to them and feeling like I wasn't enough. And you can imagine when you do this; you end up stripping yourself of confidence and feeling like you don't belong. And what we know from research and what I know from the women I've worked with is that I wasn't alone in this. This is something that as women, we often have a tendency to do. We tend to focus on our gaps, focus on our weaknesses and convince ourselves that we are not ready, that we don't have what it takes and in doing that, we don't put ourselves out there. We aren't then taking the opportunities that that could catapult us to success. So that was a big turning point for me. And then on the journey, I also, as I said a little earlier, I experienced being in roles where I was a high performer but I wasn't happy because I was doing stuff that I just didn't like. I didn't actually enjoy it but I happened to be good at it. And I see this happening a lot. Again, in organisations especially when you're just starting out, you're often told what you're good at based on your performance. And people will see that. Management sees that and they think, oh, you have a talent in this, let's give you more of that to do and let's promote you in areas of that and then we start to just assume that, well, yes, maybe that's my strength. What I like is Marcus Buckingham, who's a thought leader and a researcher in the area of strengths; he talks about how strengths are just not things. They're not just things that you happen to be good at, you also have to actually enjoy doing it. So it has to be something that strengthens you or energises you, you know, you look forward to doing it because we know that when you're good at something and you look forward to doing it, you're going to deliver all of yourself. You're going to achieve much better outcomes. But, you know, I challenge everyone who's listening, all the women on the journey with us to think about how much of your career has been a result of just because you've been good at something and then an opportunity has come and just because you're good at it, you've taken it, as opposed to really asking yourself, do I love this? Is this aligned with something that energises me? And if it isn't, maybe ask yourself, how can I bring more of what energises me into what I do every day? Are there ways I can put my hand up for extra opportunities to take on extra responsibility? Infuse it somehow because you're going to be so much happier and more fulfilled. Now, when I have spent a lot of time coaching women, especially more senior women who have been working their way up and they've been very successful, a number of them come to me and they share with me that they're actually not happy. They've achieved what they wanted to achieve. You know, they were very

goal-oriented but they've reached a point where they're just not feeling fulfilled and they can't figure out why. And when we go through this process of exploring what is it that you love, what do you really enjoy, what energises you, what do you look forward to the most? And then we ask them, okay, so what does your current role look like? There's a complete misalignment where they're in a position because they're good at it. They're very good at it but it's not aligned with their strengths. And so they're not able to bring their whole authentic self to work. And because they feel like but I'm a really good performer in that space, I need to be there for other people, they are then, you know, leaving a part of themselves at the door when they turn up to work every day. So a big thing to be aware of is what kind of life am I leading? What does my career look like? How can I bring more of my strengths to the table? And we know for women a lot of our strengths, you know, we hear it a lot. A lot of them revolve around people, relationships, collaboration, empathy, emotional intelligence, all of these things, which unfortunately in male-dominated industries, we find a lot of women tend to feel like they can't bring these things out because they won't get the credibility that they need or they won't be respected if they bring these things to the table but actually, these are our superpowers. And there's a big piece in us redefining how we view these things, not as weaknesses and not as these soft skills, but actually as essential leadership and business qualities. But we have to start believing that ourselves before anyone else will actually start to believe that, too. So that's, you know, when I think about how do I play to my strengths? It's really around that I'm very clear with myself on what I love doing and I find ways to do that as much as I can. And at the same time, I'm really aware of what I don't like doing. And if I have to do it, I make sure that I am competent. So I go and up skill. I do what I have to do so I can do it. But I try and minimise how much I have to do it by either delegating, by finding ways to outsource or just making it a little bit more enjoyable.

Jinny [00:14:18] I love how you said there that you view your strengths as our superpowers and looking at it and how it aligns to doing things. It really energises us and fulfills us. I think that's a very important message to hold there. And we've heard so many women throughout the series who talk about playing to their strengths and the journey sometimes that it does take them to get there.

Shadé [00:14:37] It's such a recurrent theme. I think every one of the guests that we've had on has actually highlighted this in some way about the importance of aligning a career behind their authentic strengths and not trying to be someone that they're not.

Jinny [00:14:50] Absolutely, now Shadé, in your field of work, what is the biggest thing that you see holding women back in leadership?

Shadé [00:14:57] I would say that the biggest thing when it comes to women and really what holds them back, I mean, of course there are lots of situational things that we need to acknowledge, especially in male-dominated industries, some institutionalised things but aside from that, what I see consistently and I experienced this myself when I was starting out my career, we as women have a tendency to focus on our weaknesses. We focus on our gaps. We focus on what we don't have and we allow that to completely hold ourselves back because we know when you look at psychology, the mind is designed to magnify what we focus on. So when we're focusing on how we fall short or focusing on other people and continually comparing ourselves to them, naturally you start to then notice more things that you lack and where you fall short. But by doing this, it's almost a form of selective attention or unconscious confirmation bias where by just focusing on what you lack, you're then forgetting what you bring to the table. And this is the biggest thing I see with women. And a lot of the work that I do is helping women strip away all of the self-doubt that they have and actually bring it back to what are your qualities? What are your characteristics? What's the value? How do you make people feel and reminding them importantly of their successes and their achievements. Because the other thing linked to that, closely, linked to the self-doubt, is we know from decades worth of research that when it comes to achievements and success, we have a tendency to attribute that to others, to luck or to timing. And so we don't acknowledge that, hey, we put in the effort. We applied our skills. We got through the hardship and this is what we achieved. We're very kind of humble in that way. It was just, I had an amazing team or I was in the right place at the right time. We kind of deflected all, which also means we're not particularly good at taking compliments. Another piece that I think we all need to get better at. But there's this big piece around, what are you focusing on rather than just like me, the advice I got early in my career rather than focusing on everything I didn't have, shift our focus onto what we bring, what we do, what we love doing and find a way to actually align our career around that. Now, a big piece here as well is what happens if you know, you have some areas of weakness but overall, you want to pursue a certain path because it does align with your strengths. Well, then, of course, find the gaps, do what you need to do to upskill them. I remember when I was moving into a highly strategic role; I had a lot of gaps around strategy. I was really highly regarded in the company for my skills around building engagement and culture. I had a very good personal brand but then people didn't know whether I had, you know, any commercial skills. Actually that's another point worth mentioning, a lot of women, because we have a lot of these strengths around people and culture and collaboration, empathy, emotional intelligence, all the things I mentioned before, we sometimes incorrectly assume that they are not commercial in value and we underplay them. We undersell ourselves. And if we're not believing in the value that these strengths bring, other people won't either. So a big piece actually that some of the work I do with women is helping them recognise their commerciality, the commercial value of what they bring. So some women will say things like, oh, I'm just not good at numbers, I just don't like Excel. And by verbalising these things, you're reinforcing a limit within yourself. I mean, it's okay to have a preference around not enjoying numbers and things like that

but when we explicitly state that out loud, we're reinforcing the stereotype that women are not good with numbers and then taking it one step back when we think about, okay, what are our authentic qualities that we bring? So here's a classic example, I was working with a client some time ago and she was talking about how, you know, she is really good when it comes to building collaboration within teams that, you know, previously there was no collaboration. There were silos and people were competing. And I said to her that's fantastic, so you see collaboration as a strength. What's the value of, you know, being able to infuse collaboration into culture? What's the benefit that brings? She kind of stopped and thought about it for a while and she said, well, I guess people can work better together, so decisions can be made quicker, people are probably more engaged. I said, that's great. What's the benefit of that? What's the benefit of more efficiency and decisions and more engagement? She said, well, I guess people enjoy coming to work. And she kind of got stuck in this point around. Well, I guess people just enjoy coming to work, which is still important. But there are a number of additional steps when people enjoy coming to work, what happens? People are more likely to perform. You have an increase in productivity. What does that result in, that results in direct bottom line impacts. So by helping us as women recognise that even our feminine qualities, they have a direct commercial impact. And we have to get really good at acknowledging that, whether it's in interviews, whether it's in meetings with managers, whether it's even just how we present ourselves, we have real impact. We need to own that, embrace that so that other people recognise that we are actually contributing and valuably contributing to the team and to the objectives of the company as well.

Jinny [00:20:17] Absolutely and I think even if you look at a lot of companies now and their real focus on diversity and inclusion, we really are seeing them look towards that as being an answer to having opportunities to solve many problems, to bring different teams together and to look at the way that their culture plays such a big importance to their organisations as well.

Shadé [00:20:37] Absolutely, we're actually seeing even more of a shift even in leadership, you know, when you look at the World Economic Forum a number of years back, identified emotional intelligence as being one of the top 10 leadership skills required to thrive. And I would argue that the other nine are kind of underpinned by emotional intelligence anyway. But we're definitely seeing a shift in them in culture and in organisations recognising that these qualities are actually really important because when you don't have engaged people, it's very difficult to make a business function.

Jinny [00:21:09] Yes, 100% and one of the other themes that's been coming out, Shadé, throughout the series has been the concept of imposter syndrome. And I know you're a leading expert on this. In fact, you're actually doing your Ph.D. on the subject. Can you share with us what is behind this common experience for women? And is it possible to just get over it?

Shadé [00:21:31] Just get over it, I love it. I'll touch on that but first, the imposter syndrome. I love the work I'm doing on the Ph.D. because the reason why I picked this topic is because I was actually looking at the inner critic in the role of leadership advancement. And because I've consistently seen so many women hold themselves back because of the imposter syndrome, the inner critic that they're listening to in their mind, all of these things that really just keep them stuck. Now, what is imposter syndrome? It's this psychological pattern where you doubt your skills, you doubt your talents and your accomplishments and you have this persistent, internalised fear of being exposed as a fraud or as an imposter. You're also convinced that you are undeserving of any success in spite of a really strong track record of performance. So we typically see imposter syndrome in a lot of high performing women. They have you know, you look at their background and you think, wow, what an incredible success story. And then they're thinking, well, I don't believe I deserve it. And when we look at how it manifests, especially in women, there's a number of sort of telltale signs. One of them is this belief of I cannot fail, I must not fail. You've got a fear of failure because if you fail, you're afraid people will find out that you're actually an imposter. So there's this really strong fear of failure, which means you don't put yourself in a position where there's any kind of risk. But it also means you are not putting your hand up for opportunities or actually doing things to contribute to your growth. The second sign is the obvious one. It's I feel like a fraud. I feel like I'm an imposter. I don't believe that I deserve any of the success I've achieved. I don't believe I deserve the recognition I received. I feel like other people have been deceived into thinking that I am as capable as I am. The third one is the one I mentioned earlier around how you believe your achievements are a result of others, luck or timing. It's not me; it's just my amazing team. I was in the right place at the right time. I just got lucky. I just had a great mentor. And we actually, we hear this a lot when women are accepting awards, you know, if you're ever at an awards, at industry awards events or even when it comes to the entertainment industry, when we're watching things like the Oscars, it's very interesting to look at the differences between how men typically accept honours and how women typically accept honours. And a big part of that is because what is socially acceptable, but also as a woman, if you're not owning your achievements, you're reminding yourself or reinforcing to yourself that maybe you don't deserve this and then planting a seed to everyone else. Maybe she doesn't deserve this so something for us to be aware of and then the final telltale sign is this idea of, you know, success is no big deal. Oh, I've achieved so much in my career, but, oh, it's no big deal, you know, because you feel like you didn't put in the effort. You don't deserve it. So you kind of just overlook it and we see this consistently with women in their career advancement. We've seen it consistently come up actually in the, you know, the wonderful guests that we've had on the podcast where there's been so much humility, some of them saying, oh, I don't feel like I should be invited along. I don't feel worthy of that so, again, classic example of impostor syndrome. I think the biggest thing women do, though, actually that would be the biggest thing women do when it comes to imposter syndrome at work. The first one is we self-censor what we want to say. What does that

mean? That basically means that we have a thought pop into our mind and we don't say it because we're listening to those inner critics that are telling us that's a silly idea. People are going to think you're stupid; no one's going to agree with you. Don't rock the boat. And so we listen to those voices and we say nothing, which means we don't get any visibility. And visibility is incredibly important for women, especially for women so that's that first thing. And then the second one is that when it comes to imposter syndrome is you have these voices in your head, these inner critics, which is the ego, and they're trying to protect you. They're trying to keep you safe from the risk of failing or being criticised or rejected. And then when you listen to them, you actually are safe because you're not putting yourself in a position where you might be criticised or rejected or say something silly. But at the same time, you are stagnant, you are completely stuck. You're not progressing. So that would be the, you know, the biggest things I think women fall into and often we're not even consciously aware of it because it's so much a part of who we are. I haven't even touched on where this comes from. And often it comes from parental expectation as a child receiving inconsistent reinforcement, maybe emotional neglect, maybe parents who believed in us too much. And we felt like we could never achieve what they wanted us to. Lots of things there, but it's an important one for women. You know, there's one quote I love, which I will share, and it's from Richard Branson. And I came across it early in my career and I've stuck with it. He says, "if somebody offers you an amazing opportunity, but you're not sure you can do it, say yes, then learn how to do it later." And I love it because it ties into that question you asked around, you know, can you just get over it? Can you just get over impostor syndrome? And it's one of these things; it's not about getting over it. It's kind of redefining your relationship with the self-doubt and acknowledging that, okay, I have doubt about something but I'm not going to allow it to hold me back. I'm just going to say yes and then take action and do what I need to do to figure out how to make it work.

Jinny [00:27:11] Some really interesting insights around imposter syndrome there, Shadé, I won't give away any names but when we approach women to be on this podcast, we had many of them say, are you sure it should be me? Isn't there someone better? You feel free to say no. So even with these incredible women sharing their journeys, there still is some of that imposter syndrome hanging over their heads for sure. So Shadé, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to advancing women's leadership. Our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that's ignited their leadership for us to add to our Leadership Toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. What are you going to add to our toolbox today, Shadé?

Shadé [00:27:53] I'm so excited that you're asking me this question now because we've had so many wonderful tools from all of the guests that have come through. And I was thinking about this one for a while, actually. I kept kind of going between a number of different ideas that I wanted to share. But the one I'm going to share with you is a very basic one that has served me very well. And I hope it serves all of

the women on the journey with us well too. It's very basic. It's the COA model for taking action. So when you're in a position where you are filled with doubt, when you feel the imposter syndrome, whatever it might be, there are three steps you want to follow. The first one is C-control. What can I control here? Because again, often what happens in these moments, we're actually consumed by things outside of our control. What will someone think of me is actually outside of our control. How will I come across to others that's outside of our control. So you ask yourself, what can I control here? O is opportunity, what is the opportunity here? What is the opportunity for me to learn, for me to grow, for me to figure out something different, to try something new to experiment? When you shift into an opportunity mindset, you're generally going to be more open to taking risks and to be more creative about how you problem solve, more resourceful when you need to find support so that's the second one, opportunity. And then the third part is A, action. What action am I going to take? Because I always say the most effective antidote when it comes to imposter syndrome and self-doubt and that feeling of kind of paralysis is taking action. When you take action, you're showing yourself, I've got this. I can figure this out. Often, we know that when you take that one step in the right direction, you feel that it's not as hard as you made it out to be in your head and you're getting that shot of dopamine, which is that motivation, hormone-activating the reward pathways in the brain. You're more likely to want to continue moving forward. So super simple COA control, what can I control? O, opportunity, what is the opportunity here? And A, action, what action will I take?

Jinny [00:30:01] That's such a great simple framework, Shadé that you've just mentioned. And it's something that we will definitely be adding to the show notes. I've loved this conversation with you. And I'm so glad we could turn the tables on you today, Shadé.

Shadé [00:30:14] Thanks, Jinny; I've had such a great time. I feel like we could talk about this for days.

Jinny [00:30:22] That was such a rich discussion that's brought to light so many recurring themes in so many of the conversations we've had throughout this series, including minding the gaps, imposter syndrome and of course, playing to our strengths. What a way to wrap up Season One of Leading Women. Make sure you subscribe to the Leading Women podcast so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review and share with other women leaders and keep the conversation going with #leadingwomenAUS