



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

**Episode 1: Anna Marsden on Leadership For Purpose.**

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai  
Interviewee: Anna Marsden**

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

---

In this episode the purposeful Anna Marsden, Managing Director of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation shares her impactful career in the For Purpose sector. We dive into navigating lightning strike moments in leadership, quietening our inner critic, and embracing dual psychology to thrive in the new normal of business.

---

**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 is not only topical, but it's also a vital one for us to have. What a privilege to welcome our guest, a remarkable woman who has elevated our awareness across the arts and environment to offer us all the opportunity to contribute. Anna Marsden, Managing Director of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, shares her impactful career with the for purpose sector. We dive into navigating lightning strike moments in leadership, quietening our inner critic and embracing dual psychology to thrive. Thanks so much for joining us from Queensland on Leading Women, Anna.

**Anna [00:01:19]** Hi, how are you going?

**Shadé [00:01:21]** Really, really well. We can't wait to dive right in and hear all about your story.

**Anna [00:01:25]** And diving is appropriate. Sorry, you've got to do the dive in joke. When you talk to someone from the reef.

**Shadé [00:01:39]** So, Anna, can you share with us and help us dive into the story of your incredible leadership journey?

**Anna [00:01:09]** Look, absolutely and I should say at the start, I still can't believe that I'm in this forum Women in Leadership because I still feel like the leadership journey never starts and never ends. It's this thing but, gosh, you look back on a career and you start to identify points. I have had a remarkable time, but I started off very much in my first loves, always been the arts. When I was leaving high school, the dream was to be on the stage and my father, who was a bank manager, I think in the end what he basically said was just because you have the you know, you think you've got the talent, don't confuse that with just confidence to get up on a stage. He did point out that I was very bossy. So I chose to look at arts management, which was at that time in Australia in the sort of early '90s, it was still an emergent. I don't mean that they weren't professional people working in the cultural sector, but it wasn't really seen. It was seen as a sector, not an industry. So there wasn't the business acumen that you see now in running these large cultural institutions. So I started off doing that thinking I would run a theatre company, found myself post university working in art galleries for about 14 years and that was remarkable, took me around the world and really unlocked a passion for connecting great brands and great work and great people with the public, but also fundraising, asking for money, seeking investment, enabling these people to be brilliant. So I did 14 great years in the visual arts, then worked a little stint in corporate communications and consultancy, which I think everybody in this world does a little moment in consultancy. It wasn't the best skin for me, but it was still amazingly valuable from a skills training exercise. Then I found myself being the CEO of the Queensland Ballet and I did that for seven years. Now I'm the Managing Director of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation at the time when the world is watching what we do to save this irreplaceable treasure.

**Shadé** [00:03:39] And I love how you started and said that leadership, it really doesn't have a start and an end. It's an ongoing journey and you've had a remarkable journey through leadership starting early when your father identified a core quality that you had. I mean, he called it bossy, but we call it being assertive and having those leadership strengths within you. So Anna, many of the women that we're interviewing are thriving in male dominated industries and environments but that's not the case for you. Not that you're not thriving, but you're actually thriving in the generally women majority areas of the for purpose sector, the arts and now environmental awareness and protection, how have you seen women activating leadership in these spaces?

**Anna** [00:04:22] Well, you're absolutely right. I think I mean, I'm not to say that I haven't had significant male role models and leaders and I will say that even in the environmental, the NGO space, there are women everywhere and the activation is powerful. I will still say at the very top table, I sit in a lot of rooms as the only woman and that's something that you don't focus on it too much, but you are aware of it. So that's something we have to change. We have to elevate up. I can't help but say that you can't disentangle your experience at home and your experience as a woman and as a mother, then you can as your leadership journey. There is no doubt that I mean, my eldest daughter turned eight yesterday. So there's no doubt for me my leadership journey and being a mum and the awareness of that interplays with the aha's I've had about how to nurture and cultivate an environment that frankly, I think is just a no brainer. How do you truly enable people to be great? Along that way, I mean, crunch to the end, there is no more productive, empathetic, powerful, purposeful creature on this planet than a working mother and I don't have the psychology or the data but I will fight anybody on that fact but I think what's really interesting, there are two moments that I think are quite tent pole moments for me. One was probably about 15 years ago, I was in a women's lunch and there were amazing guest speakers who really were the heroes and broke so many glass ceilings in Australia but they said something in that lunch, which was women, once you start, once you have a child, you pretty much start climbing the ladder, you start progressing up. It's so interesting, 15 years ago, how I received that information was, I better get climbing because I'm going to have kids soon so that's how I took it. It spurred me on to just focus on climbing the ladder before I even think about thought about children and that phrasing or that headspace or fact came back to me when I had my first child sort of eight years on where I went. Why, what a crazy idea that you stop growing, developing once you've got the kids, once you have to get up in the middle of the day because you get a call from school that someone's throwing up all of that kind of thing that coupled with the fact that I've only ever been a mother while being a CEO. There is an extreme privilege that comes with that because I don't have to get up and declare to anybody, oh, I've had a call from school, can I please leave or my kid is sick, can I please work from home? I just send an email saying I'm working from home and that is a privilege that I take for granted and there's a lot of people in organisations that don't have that even, you know, I like to think that now for so many years, I've been really striving to walk the walk and talk the talk about work life balance and the fact that in the end, you work the hours that work for you and you do your work and you be present when you can but sometimes home calls, you know, different duties require you to be there but even two weeks ago, one of my 2ICs, who's got a two year old, she phoned me up in the holidays just to check that as she was juggling the days that her nanny was going to work, is it okay that she could move her day off from Wednesday to Thursday? Of course, I went, of course, why are you ringing me? Just had to check it so even though I like to think that we're cultivating this, the thing that I can't change is that little voice that you cannot quieten to go. Am I getting an A at home and am I getting an A in here? Is it okay, are people saying she's not doing enough? So I think that is still going to be the challenge. I say to the women who are listening, you've got to quieten that voice because no one, everyone else is doing their job and not thinking about that.

**Shadé** [00:08:10] And of course, this voice that we have in our heads, it really is a tendency for all women from young women across all life stages.

**Anna** [00:08:18] Oh, absolutely, I can't remember ever not having the voice in my head. I think it's women's leadership guilt and she gets stronger or louder at certain times and you certainly have to find a way to make peace with this friend in your head but she is there. I think, unfortunately, she can hold you back at critical times but it is guilt. There's no other word for it. She puts herself down and she makes you think that you're not good enough and we all carry it. I think mothers carry it differently to carers and you hear differently as young women, as you do to women in later life stages. It's just something that us as female animals have got to make peace with and somehow, we've got to fall in love with it and use it.

**Shadé** [00:09:04] Anna, you're a change maker in the for purpose sector, also known as not for profit, but never before have the words for purpose been so meaningful in the context of our business and our professional world. Can you tell us a little bit more around your insights into people generally being more aware and focused on their purpose?

**Anna** [00:09:22] Well, I absolutely think 2020 was the shake up year, particularly in Australia. We started with bushfires. We crept into COVID. The world didn't stop. The challenges didn't stop but people did have a disruption. They had to confront the fragility of life. They had to confront that as animals, we want to embrace connection and community and this social distance. I still don't think we are completely aware of how much this being constantly told distance, distance, distance into our head goes against our psyche. There's an isolation piece that comes out of that. What it has done is make people realise I have one life, I have one community. How do I be purposeful, make it count. We certainly saw this with the kinds of feedback and dialogue we got from the general public to the plight of the reef next year as people were able to quieten and consider different things. All of our social media followers just increased. We got donations from around the world. People were having a reckoning and a resettlement. I also saw a lot of people either were stood down or given the opportunity to shift their work style to actually think is this what I want to keep doing. So I do think we're in a little bit of a transition where people are trying to find a more purposeful life in a more purposeful vocation and not everybody gets to work in the Great Barrier Reef Foundation. Everybody actually gets to work right in the coalface of purpose work that doesn't mean you can't have a purposeful life. [00:10:28]What I love about being purpose driven is you do need to understand the why and you have to listen to both your head and heart. I also really believe you've got to have a thin skin. There are many ways that you as a person, as an individual, as a worker can lean in and be part of the solution, and be able to look at your children and have them look at you when you're 90 and be able to say, I did my part. I think that's what we're all working out at the moment. It's beautiful because the world, the planet, she needs us. She needs us to be good citizens and that's just one phrase, she needs us to lean into this and quite simply be a little bit better. [42.0s]

**Shadé** [00:11:40] Now, Anna, you talk of lightning strike moments in leadership, which we all at Leading Women, love. Can you share the story of the succession of your lightning strike moments and the gratitude that you had for them and of course, how you manage that challenge that totally blindsided you in 2018?

**Anna** [00:11:56] Absolutely and look, I should say, I stole the lightning strike concept from Idina Menzel when someone talked to her about what's it like being Elsa? She said, well, I've had two lightning strike moments in my career with Wicked and then Elsa and I went, well, you do find yourself in a place where it just clicks and you happen to be sitting there at the time and you can't help but go, someone else could be in this chair but it happened to me, so I step up and be it. I've had three moments of extreme, I won't say, luck anymore I would say gratitude and just opportunity, because I do as I get older, you start to realise, luck just feels a bit too random. I think that's appropriate. So the first one was when my second post in the visual arts, I was looking at the Queensland Art Gallery. I was quite a young member of the leadership team that collectively we helped achieve a second site being the Gallery of Modern Art. As a young, I was in my 20s, it was just a remarkable moment of the cultural awakening of Brisbane, which is my hometown and to be in the middle of that, doing the fundraising, the sponsorship, the events and all of that, it was just a dream. It was a pinch me moment. It also was a moment where I just, all I did was work. So you look back on it and realise it, there was a lot of work life balance back then and that was what the 20s were for and my second lightning strike moment was at the Queensland Ballet, which again, and not to take anything away from this remarkable organisation and the heritage of it, when I walked into there as the CEO, it was an undiscovered treasure. It was playing to decreasing audiences. It certainly wasn't rated as one of the cultural moments of Queensland. I was fortunate to be there for its sort of awakening and renaissance and part of that was bringing on board Li Cunxin, Mao's Last Dancer, as the artistic director. So that was, again, just a remarkable moment that you hold onto your seats but I will say the leadership aha about that post was that was the first time I discovered the loneliness of being a CEO where you really are holding the map, holding the plan and everyone sort of blindly following you. You do feel such a large responsibility and accountability to hope that you've got it right when you do a significant change or restructure to an organisation but all of those draw from what happened with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and even within that, this job I mean, right now I've had two lightning strike moments. The first was three months into my job and I will confess that I started this job right at the birth of my second child, thinking I hopefully will be able to manage this job a couple of days a week. It was supposed to be my great work life balance dream, three months into this job, the first mass coral bleaching event took shape on coral reefs around the world, followed by a second mass coral bleaching event and to put that in context, in an 18 month period, Australia, the world lost half the coral on the Great Barrier Reef, an ecosystem the size of Italy. We lost half of it and that community of scientists and traditional owners and managers and government policy advisers looked around, where's the heart? Where's the face? Where's the charity? He was this gorgeous little charity working along as a quiet achiever for 20 years, sitting there ready to be discovered and to step in and play its role. So that was an amazing lightning strike moment where we basically went, game on, we're not worthy of the name if we don't lean into this and be the front door where people can come and get not just the facts, but the hope and again, enable people to do great work. Then I guess because of the work that we did, because of the high relationships and partnerships that we built and our independence and our can-do attitude, in May 18, the Australian government decided to grant us half a billion dollars and the process perhaps was

a little bit unique. It's triggered, I would say, an extreme level of curiosity. Many people plus politics, Canberra, which I've never really been part of, whoa that's quite a thing when you're thrust in the middle of it. The curiosity, which I'll continue to call it, turned into a reefgate hashtag crisis that I lived with for eight weeks. It spawned two enquiries, a Senate enquiry. At our peak, we were fielding probably 80 unique media enquiries a day. It was just intense and because and this is really important for not for profits, because we were a quiet achiever, because in some ways we proudly didn't spend money on communications. We spent it on the reef, on the projects, on our cause being practical, we were unknown. So for those who didn't know us but had heard about us for the first time, couldn't help it. I have to say; they thought they could smell a rat. What's going on here? What's this deal? When we were just a really great quiet achiever and what the government was hoping to achieve, which was disruption, innovation, collective impact, that was our DNA and that's what we have been doing quietly for 20 years. So the challenge for us was it made perfect sense, perhaps not, the quantum was certainly surprising, but it made perfect sense for us to be tasked with this amazing endeavour. Our team absolutely felt we could be brilliant. We could earn the right and be a great guardian of this grant, and we could perhaps change forever the outlook of the Great Barrier Reef but the media, the crisis, the Twitterverse, it was paralysing and it got personal. People tweeted pictures of a premier holding a picture of my baby at an art gallery opening and drawing conclusions. It was just insane and for a team who we had cultivated to have a thin skin, they felt every barb. We had staff sitting at computers just sobbing because they were stumbling upon things at Twitter. I found out a few months later that one woman had chosen to pull her child from his rugby games because all the mothers wouldn't stand with her because they thought that she was corrupt in some way. It was just brutal and for me to lead that was really tough. I mean, I try not to remember all of it, but I remember a critical moment, probably on day three when it was at its peak of the media enquiries sitting in my car in the car park. I've never had a panic attack but I think this is what it looks like, just paralysed, not being able to get out of the car and just crying. I phoned my husband to go; I don't think I can go in. I'm at a loss. I don't know what I can do. Probably a part of me had hoped for, like the Hollywood response or probably what I hope Kamala Harris' husband said to her to pick her up and make her walk in. Then I'd walk into an office with flowers but instead, he said what I probably needed to hear, which was, Hey put your big girl pants on and go in there and do your job and so I did. You'll see that that was the day that I was on the 7:30 report and the project and we went, no, you're telling a story. You're telling our story. We're going to tell our story. We understand the curiosity. We're very happy to be transparent and to answer every question but you will not say these things about us because we are good people and the bottom line is, is the reef needs this money. We lost half the reef. She needs the support. If this is the way the money's going to come to her, let us get on with this job. The gift of that moment was that gave me my north star. It gave me my truth, which is that whenever I'm struggling, have a little quiet moment and go what does the reef need us to do? What does she need me to do? I follow that and I have to say I haven't made an error of judgment because she's our customer. It's it. We work for her.

**Shadé** [00:19:51] What an amazing story, I mean, going back to the beginning of your career, those lightning strike moments that culminated in that crisis that gained so much media attention to that moment, when you're sitting in the carpark, you call your husband expecting him to say something and you get something completely different but it's almost what you needed to hear at that moment. What I think is so powerful is that actually in all of these examples, it was very much a conscious choice that you made. There was a certain point in time where you said, okay, game on, we are going to do this and so initially you shared that you just happened to be in the right place at the right time. But there's definitely some element of you consciously deciding, this is it, we're going to lean in. When it comes to crisis situations, I think there's so much that can be said about women making that conscious decision that I am here for it. I can do this whether it means reaching out to someone for support, a mentor or a loved one, but just backing yourself. You also highlighted that your purpose is to ask what does the reef need me to do? So you're actually acting not just for yourself, not just for your team, but actually on behalf of this voiceless reef that needs you. We also know when it comes to women; women are generally more confident and more assertive when they're acting on behalf of someone else, whether it's other women, whether it's their team or whether it's their future self or their younger self to be a role model. So I love that came out of such a strong theme here, Anna, thank you so much for sharing that story with us now. Now Anna, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership and our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that has ignited their leadership so that we can add that into our leadership toolbox to really elevate equality. What are you going to be adding for us today?

**Anna** [00:21:39] Okay, so I'm going to add a piece of psychology, dual psychology that a woman shared with me quite a few years ago, which up until 2020, I used to help me be me and be positive and optimistic while I stand in front of a front line ecosystem to a changing climate because I think it's one of the most common comments I get is, how can you be this positive? Isn't the world ending? So this has been a great mindset but increasingly this concept, this psychology has been picked up and applied to COVID and how business leaders and leaders, even in the community, can handle the brutality of life at times and still remain resilient, optimistic, powerful and prevail and so

the concept or the idea is called the Stockdale paradox and quite simply and it was made famous it was coined in a book that Jim Collins wrote, Good to Great, I've even got here as my little reference thing, which is a great book, a Stanford book. He understood in America this Admiral Jim Collins is quite a famous figure. He was the most senior member of the military ever to be in a Vietnam POW camp and daily tortured and because of his seniority, was really used as an example to try to bring down the American government and all of that kind of thing and win some battles. Anyway, he managed to survive that and actually go on to be this remarkable leader and member of the community. When Jim Collins was he's always wanted to understand this man, so he interviewed him and asked him what is the secret of his success. He had this great phrasing about the fact that while he could accept the raw brutality and the reality of the circumstance he was in, he still never lost determination that he would prevail. He would survive and he would get home and when Jim was interviewing, he said, and who didn't make it? So what the admiral said was the optimists, because they kept on saying, well, we will be out of this at Easter end they're not. We'll be out of Christmas and not and so for them, it basically just wore down their spirits. The optimist didn't survive. You've got to assume a dual psychology to be able to never lose faith in the end of the story, to have that faith, but to confront the reality and that has been something that's been really powerful for me. I placed it in the Great Barrier Reef circumstance right now and the work that we do, the scientists who inform us, we know the modeling is 30 years to live, that's as blunt as it is, 30 years to live not just the Great Barrier Reef, coral reefs on this planet, which when you play that out that's not just a loss of a phenomenal destination on everyone's bucket list and an icon to Australia that's home for fish, that's a food source of survival, that is a hell of an ecosystem to fall. What I say is that if you do nothing that if you go home and put doona over your head and who walks into a doctor's office and says you got 30 years to live, but you can get a diet, stop smoking, do this, do this and go home, no, I won't do any of that, I will just sit still for 30 years and wait. And so this is it, we will prevail because we will get the right combination of great brains from around the world to work this and we will leave nothing in the tank and so that's my drive is that team Australia will prevail. We will get there at the end but I don't lose sight of the fact that we will have dark days. At the moment, every time they announce a new tropical cyclone in far north Queensland and we're in the season right now, we think great, sorry, Cairns, but that's cooling down the reef. It means we have water coral bleaching event so this is the kind of world that we're in raw brutality but you know what? We're going to get there and the saving of this Great Barrier Reef is going to be part of the Australian legacy and story moving forward.

**Shadé** [00:25:27] So, Anna, when you put it in a 30-year context, it really puts in place a timeline for your one and only customer. For her, the reef, what is the next horizon so that we don't just sit back for the next 30 years?

**Anna** [00:25:41] Well, the good news is we're not. We're absolutely not and I think in the last two years, what we've been able to do is assemble the best and the brightest, a Team Australia approach. All I can see down the runway in the next five years is great announcements. This is proving and this is good. We've got a cure here and this is making a difference. So there's good news coming up. Extra! Extra! Good news coming that doesn't mean we won't have dark days but I think when we talk about collective impact, one of the big aha's and oversights of all of us is to truly understand the role and the necessity of this bio cultural stewardship of the Great Barrier Reef and its protection and that can only be done with deep, authentic relationships with First Nations people. There are 72 different traditional owner communities that have some guardianship and have had guardianship over the Great Barrier Reef in memoriam. They have been managing, protecting, loving, living with this ecosystem forever. We've come in and oversized it and done all of this sort of stuff. They are the solution and I'm so proud that through the investment from the Australian government, we've been able to put a significant amount of money aside to realise the aspirations of First Nations people and that's being led by a remarkable team in the foundation, all women, our traditional owner protection team and just the work is coming out of that. The deep thought, it gives me goose bumps. I'm learning so much about it and I love walking into those rooms and be able to be a kid again and say, tell me, am I doing this right? We're all learning together but I have to say, out of everything that I've done in my life and a few of the executives share this with me, this is the work that we think we'll be most proud of is how we work together with First Nations communities to protect a special part of Australia.

**Shadé** [00:27:34] What a powerful message to end on, Anna, thank you so much for such an insightful, energetic, passionate conversation full of your pivotal moments in your career, insights for women to apply directly in their careers around finding purpose and using challenge to really spur them on. I can't thank you enough for joining us.

**Anna** [00:27:54] This means a lot to me personally and any chance to tell the story of what Australians are doing to save this treasure. I'll always take it. So thank you.

**Shadé** [00:28:06] What an impactful conversation, especially the context of 30 years, not just for our reef, but all reefs on the planet, mostly because this has to be resolved in our lifetime. It's not a pay it forward. Looking forward to

your joining us next episode. Until then, share this episode with the women leaders, you know, and let's activate leadership together.

**Jinny** [00:28:31] 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 [womeninfoocus.com.au](http://womeninfoocus.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)