



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

**Episode 2: Julie Drago on Relationship based Leadership.**

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai  
Interviewee: Julie Drago**

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

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In this episode the well networked Julie Drago, CEO of Hero Properties builds on the value of relationships, how to be seen and heard in a male-dominated industry, and how important it is to be involved at an industry level to be able to shift the business landscape.

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**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 centred around relationships and service, both essential foundations for building a base of loyal clients and activating your industry leadership. In today's conversation, our guest, Julie Drago, CEO of Hero Properties, brings this conversation to life beautifully. Julie builds on the value of relationships, how to be seen and heard in a male-dominated industry, and how important it is to be involved at an industry level to be able to shift the business landscape. Thanks so much for joining us, Julie, on Leading Women from WA.

**Julie [00:01:22]** Thanks very much for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

**Shadé [00:01:25]** Me too, I can't wait to dive right in. So, Julie, can you share with us the story of your humble leadership journey?

**Julie [00:01:31]** Okay, so my parents immigrated from Italy in the late or early, early 60s, coming here pretty much unskilled. Through the 70s, my father established a large fabrication business that he ran successfully for around 30 years. I was very fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to go from a very young age to work in the facility, in my school holidays, weekends. I think that's where I sort of developed my passion for fabrication and workshops in that industry and then throughout the next sort of 15 years, we spent a considerable amount of time building the business up to, you know, tackle huge projects all around WA. We put a lot of the high-rise in the city, a lot of the North West Shelf, we did the fabrication for. Then in the early 2000s, we decided as a family to concentrate more on developing, which is something that we've always done and then we basically decided to close the fabrication business down and lease out the facility. Then over the next 10 years, last 20 years, actually, we've spent a considerable amount of time developing industrial property. So we basically built large workshops and leased them out to mining, oil and gas multinational companies. Then, you know, to me, it's about the developing those relationships to expand the portfolio with tenants within our group but also outside of it. Two years ago, I was appointed CEO and now I spend a considerable amount of time working on developing more relationships with companies that are within our group, but also external to our group to try and encourage them to come as what we call part of our family.

**Shadé [00:03:08]** Julie, you're thriving in a male-dominated industry and environments, including politics. Can you share with us some of the barriers that you might have faced and some of the practical ways that you've actually navigated through those?

**Julie [00:03:19]** You know, growing up in a really male-dominated industry, such as fabrication, I didn't really work a lot with women apart from the administration roles, which I wasn't sort of heavily involved in, and then moving

through to being involved in the Property Council and in the Labor Party. It's been an interesting journey. I think the biggest thing that I've learnt from all of that is that growing up and this is one of the things that my father was great at encouraging me to do was just to step up and back yourself, because I think going into these environments very often, I would be the only woman in a room. I just had to very early on just believing what I was doing and what I was saying, and that I did have a voice that maybe people would listen to, because I think that's just you're your own worst enemy, whether you really believe in yourself or not. It's just taking that chance to step forward.

**Shadé** [00:04:09] Julie, I know you're an advocate when it comes to women amplifying our natural skills and our strengths around communication, empathy, connection, building trust, why do you feel this is so important for women to really embrace?

**Julie** [00:04:23] I think as a woman, you know, we are naturally more empathetic. When we look at problems, you know, we can look at the problem from both sides of the argument and sometimes you can get caught up on trying to win an argument but being more open and understanding about where the other person is coming from enables us to be really good negotiators and that's how I tackle things all the time. If I'm in a negotiation with someone and there's a dispute, I always put my hat on about how would I be feeling if I was on the other side and then trying to find a middle ground. So I guess that's probably really important to have that empathy and understanding about where they're coming from, but also having some great communication, because that's really important, too, to let them understand about why we are in this situation and what we're trying to achieve jointly because I really believe in win-win. You can always try and go the extra mile and come out on top and have the best outcome for you but most times it's better if you meet in the middle, because if you both walk away knowing that you've got an outcome that's acceptable to both of you, okay, you might not think it's fantastic, but it's a mediated outcome, then I think that's a great way to come out of a discussion or even to come out of a negotiation. So that empathy and communication is so important and I think as a woman, we can draw on that easier than what say some men can do.

**Shadé** [00:05:55] I'm completely with you. Aiming for these win-win environments and outcomes is far better for both parties and to your point; it's really leveraging that authentic empathy that a lot of women naturally possess. Now, one of the things many women face, especially those earlier in their careers in male-dominated environments, is navigating this first impression judgment that sometimes comes from others and the thoughts in their mind about do I belong here? What are they thinking about me? Am I competent? It can almost sabotage them. Now, I know that you've been able to break through that barrier and you've been able to gain visibility across Councils and the Labour Party. Can you talk to us about how you're doing this and how you're really leveraging networks and events?

**Julie** [00:06:39] I guess the thing is that I had to really early on stop questioning myself, because that was one of the things that you just get so caught up on in every meeting you would go into, you'd be like, well, am I being portrayed correctly here or what? Do they really know who I am or what I stand for? So I guess one of the first things I do is when I go into a meeting, as you know, like introduce myself and then very quickly get into the conversation about this is what I think and what I want out of this, you know, like so that I can come across not too forward, but at least someone understands my point of view pretty early on, because I think if you don't put yourself out there, you're never going to know. I really struggled early on in the beginning when I first joined the Property Council because I hadn't been as active as what I am now in the Council. I really struggled to get that barrier through my mind, to just put myself out there and really speak up because that's the hardest thing to do. Then once you do that, you know, it's just gets easier, gets easier after time and you stop questioning about whether I belong because you know that you can add value and you do add value. So that was probably early on but now I'm a lot more confident in what I do. So I find a little bit easier and the same with the Labor Party, you know, we go to a lot of functions. So I'm constantly meeting new people and I'm just, you know, constantly, talking about what my opinions are and what we think we can do to improve things.

**Shadé** [00:08:11] And I love that you highlighted this challenge a lot of women have because you were sharing how you are very good at going in and being very clear about what you're looking for. So you've got that assertiveness factor and I know a lot of women struggle with balancing its warmth and competence, really. So the warmth comes naturally and then they're reluctant to move into the assertiveness space because they're afraid of, again, am I going to be too pushy? Will I come across as bossy? What will they think of me? So you've found this balance between the two, which is so fundamental for women when it comes to gaining respect. Then you said as well, once you do it once, it's easy to just keep doing it because you realise it's not as big and scary. So for someone who is at that point where they are their biggest obstacle and they are holding themselves back, what piece of guidance would you give them to help them just take that first step?

**Julie** [00:09:03] I think they need to ask themselves what can go wrong? The worst thing is you go to a meeting and you don't speak at all. I had this with a girl that I was mentoring a couple of years ago. You know, she said to me, I would regularly go to a meeting and my boss would be there talking and, you know, I knew this subject better than him, but I wouldn't get up and say because I just left it to him because it was easier. I said, but that's not you. You know a lot of this information, you know a lot about it. What could go wrong if you get up there and say something, you just question yourself that what can possibly go wrong? Then once you get over that hurdle, you realise pretty quickly that, wow, I've got a voice and I can use this and it's very powerful.

**Shadé** [00:09:47] I love how you said that. You've got a voice and you can use it. I think what happens to a lot of women is they're so focused on listening to the voice inside their heads, which is reminding them falsely that they are not ready, that they don't know enough, that they shouldn't put their hand up, that something may go wrong. They're giving that voice more power than their physical voice. Then by listening to that, they're never going to get the visibility and they're completely holding themselves back, which is such a shame because you see so many women, unfortunately, completely falling short. Now when it comes to speaking up and being vocal and being visible, one of the things that, again, women sometimes have in their minds is how much should I share and how vocal and how visible should I be? Do you have any guidance on this or experiences from your own personal life or what you've seen?

**Julie** [00:10:40] I think, you know, you can always over share, which is not good either but I think, you know, bringing in your own personal experiences to meetings and to situations is really important because you need to understand that what you've experienced is relevant to the discussion. So I think you have to also just balance that with there are other people in the room as well. So, you know, you can't take it all over but bringing those personal experiences, I think is really important because then that also sets the scene for you so that people can understand where you're coming from, so I think that's really important.

**Shadé** [00:11:20] And I want to highlight something you said earlier as well, how you said earlier in your career when you were in a room full of men, you were sometimes saying to yourself, do I belong here? Am I here to tick a box? Am I just filling a quota? If you again listen to those thoughts, it completely holds you back but you said, well, that got you in the room and it doesn't matter why you're in the room, you're in the room, and you're going to use that voice and actually speak up, which I think is such a fantastic lesson for all of us. Every woman everywhere really needs to remind themselves that we have a voice and we will use it. So there's a story that I'd love for you to share. It's around being on the incubator board and an experience that you had when it came to speaking up, because I think it really highlights this theme of using that voice that we've been given.

**Julie** [00:12:10] Yes, so a few years ago, I think it's probably five or 10 years ago when I was on an incubator centre board, the Council invited me to come along and join this incubator centre, which is where they subsidise operators of small businesses that are coming out of, say, being commercialising their garage, moving into, you know, subsidised rental accommodation, and then that allows them to grow their business and then hopefully move into a fully commercialised space. So they invited me to sit on their board because I thought I had input in the commercial industrial sector, which was great. But I remember my first couple of meetings when we met, we had these meetings and I remember going in and asking, you know, they were saying, we've got a waiting list 10 miles long. All these people want to come in to the centre. So great and I said, I'll just ask a stupid question here, you know, how long has people allowed to incubate in the centre? They said, oh, we don't have a time limit. Well, that doesn't make any sense, you know, like you must push if someone's an incubator business, you know, no wonder why no one can come in. So I guess it was just me as an external person coming in and who hadn't been on this Council because this board had been around for a while. As an external person that hadn't been involved in it at all, come in to ask what I thought was a stupid question, but was completely relevant because from then on, they went and set up all this timelines now that we need to, you know, someone's business needs to be now commercialised so that they went on and created a policy around well you can stay in here for this period of time. So it was really an obvious thing that me, I was thinking of asking a really silly question, but it turned out to be so relevant. It was funny.

**Shadé** [00:13:53] And had you listened to the voice in your head that may have been saying, who are you to say anything? You are new here. You wouldn't have said it, but you were curious and you asked the question and it's such a great one as well, because so often being a new person in an environment actually gives you a unique perspective and it gives you the ability to ask questions that other people might not have even considered because, hey, well, that's just how we've always done things. So this idea of being courageous and being curious and asking the right questions, this story illustrates perfectly that actually everyone else probably will agree with you if you ask, or at least it gets them thinking in a different way. So such a brilliant example of that. Now, throughout our conversation so far, you've been highlighting the absolute importance of relationships and how relationships are such a solid foundation

for leadership. Could you tell us a little bit more about your philosophy on relationships and how it's really in your blood?

**Julie** [00:14:47] Okay, so I spoke a little bit earlier about how we talk about the wider tenants group within our portfolio as part of our family. I don't say that word loosely because we genuinely do believe that because I spent so much time with all of my tenants and going there to understand their business because their business is really backing my business. So the relationship that we have is really important to me because I think that if they have a problem and if there's something that's an issue with the building or they want more space, I then go there and leverage them and move them into another building. It happens all the time. I've just recently completed a 10,000 square metre building in Forresterfield and it was an existing tenant that I grew them from a small building into a larger one over the 15 years. So it's something that I see that might not be a return tomorrow, but it's in 10 years or it's part of my thinking about they need to think of me as part of their business. Therefore, when there's an issue or when they need something more, they come to me and so that relationship is so important and it means that I'm doing things, which probably fall outside of what you would consider a normal a landlord-tenant relationship. Like I help people design wash pads in their workshop, or I've got a tenant that's in scrap metal and I help him with his environmental approvals, you know. I'm doing all this stuff outside of what I would normally do but I do it because it's relationship building and I know that it will eventually help me in the long run. Then, you know, that's why we don't lose any tenants; very few tenants leave our portfolio. The only time that would happen is, you know, obviously if the business ceased to exist, but that doesn't happen very often. So for me, it's so super duper important and that's what I would like to spend 95% of my time on right now. It's something that I'm struggling with to try and get more time to do that but it is so important.

**Shadé** [00:16:50] And I always like to call it the care factor. It's actually genuinely caring about what you do and the people that you're serving and the companies that you're serving, the clients, the customers because at the end of the day, when you strip away the lens of business, it's people that are being impacted and that care factor is so core to building relationships.

**Julie** [00:17:11] It is and it's also taking a longer-term view of things, because I think people always are so focused on a short-term gain and that's the same with relationships, right? You're never going to have a short-term relationship. It's going to take years to build, to build that trust, to build that rapport with people. You need to think about a longer-term gain. This was very obvious to us when COVID first came along and in the pandemic and we had the Commercial Tenancies Act that came through WA, which followed pretty much the federal code as well. You know, some tenants came to us and asked for rent relief and I didn't need the government to come and mandate it because we were already doing it anyway. It's in our thinking, you know, if someone was forced to close, I was already with them saying, you know, you don't have to pay rent. We'll work something through to you because it's in our long-term gain to make sure that this tenant survives and therefore is still part of our portfolio in 10 years time. So having that long-term view is so crucially important, and that's the same in leadership as well. You need to be thinking about it in long-term viewpoint.

**Shadé** [00:18:20] And on that theme of being strategic about relationships in business and you highlighted it in leadership as well, how can we take that concept and apply it for women on the journey? How can they apply that view of being strategic when it comes to networking, when it comes to relationship building? What are some tips that you want to share with them?

**Julie** [00:18:41] So I guess the probably the biggest thing is do your research before you go to an event like apart from get involved, go to events and find out where you think, you know, you can have some input. Before you go do some research and, you know, if you're following some people on LinkedIn that you like or that you think that person is really valuable, I really would like to get to know them, figure out who they are, and then actively go up to them and say, look, I'm really interested in what you've done here and here and have that conversation. Don't try to be so random about it, because networking is not like that. I mean, if that's what you do, just go to event and just pick the nearest person next to you and start talking to them. You're not going to really get as much out of as what you could. You know, you need to actively think about it and be a little bit strategic in who you want to develop those relationships with and then once you figure out who that person is, is actively follow them up because I can't tell you how many people have come up to me at events and then I've never heard from them again. You know, there's no point in doing that and that's not networking. It's not about one meeting. It might be 10 meetings before you're going to have what you would be considering, a mentee-mentor relationship or a peer-to-peer relationship. It doesn't happen over one or two meetings. It's a longer time view of it.

**Shadé** [00:19:56] You're so right there. The value of following up is so important and I would also offer the tip that if anyone is following up, include where you met the person, because sometimes they'll follow up with you months later and you actually don't remember where you met them from because it's a great little tip to include where you met them include maybe one key thing that you discussed. And again, it's leveraging those skills that we have around relationship building and connection. One other thing I'd love to touch on around relationships, is there any value in building relationships with competitors?

**Julie** [00:20:27] Yes and this is one of the things that was really interesting to me, because a lot of people say to me all the time, why are you so actively involved in the Property Council? You know, you sit on committees with your competitors. I actually think it's actually an amazing, fortunate thing to be doing because you only have one voice to make change but if you all get together and talk about the problems that you're all facing, then I think your voice is a lot more powerful and you do get a lot out of it. I mean, we don't actively share, you know, what deals we're working on and all that, but we all are challenged with the same problems so it's hugely beneficial. I've got really great relationships with a lot of our competitors in Perth. Perth is a very small town, probably to the East Coast in terms of the industrial space. You know, I can count on one hand the number of industrial developers in Perth but we all know each other and we all have respect for each other and we all get along and we all talk about the same issues. I think it's really important, especially if you're part of an industry advocacy body. You need to have that kind of input with all of you being there together and it's a lot stronger argument.

**Shadé** [00:21:40] And it's very much around almost leaving ego at the door and not viewing it as competition, but viewing it as collaborators, who are all trying to move in the same direction. Of course, you can be commercially savvy about that and not share your company secrets of what you're doing, but it highlights, again, your approach even when it comes to negotiation around this win-win mentality that you have.

**Julie** [00:22:00] Yes, that's what I was going to say about the win-win too in terms of your competitor. I mean, you can't literally win every deal. You know, they're going to win one. You'll win one that's it and that's life. You know, and if you think like that, you'll have a lot better relationship with your competitors.

**Shadé** [00:22:17] That's life. I love it. Absolutely right. So, Julie, as you know, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership and our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that's helped them on their leadership journey and we add that into our leadership toolbox to help us elevate equality. So what would you be adding for us today?

**Julie** [00:22:38] [00:22:38] So I think the most important thing you can do in any in any business is get involved with your industry body, figure out what that is, and then actively go and participate, you know, start out going to their events and then try and actively get onto some committees and be actively involved. It does take a bit of work, like I spent a lot of time doing this. It gives you a huge amount of benefits because not only are you able to help change things in your industry that you know, that frustrate you, like for us, our biggest issue in industrial is approvals and navigating the red tape around, getting developments off the ground. So being as part of involved in the Property Council, we're able to lobby the government and figure out ways to try and make our business easier. So get involved with an industry body and figure out where your voice can be the most benefit and where you can make the most change because there's no point complaining about something, get involved and be active about changing it. [59.9s]

**Shadé** [00:23:38] Yes, do something about it, absolutely, take action. Well, Julie, thank you so much for this wonderful conversation. You've given some wonderfully tangible tools around visibility, speaking up, overcoming the inner critic and that self-doubt that many women have and really leveraging feminine strengths around relationship building and connecting. So I want to thank you so much for your time. It's been wonderful.

**Julie** [00:24:00] Thanks very much for having me, Shadé. It's been really good to talk about some of this stuff that I don't really think about too much in my mind. It just comes naturally to me but it's great to talk about it.

**Shadé** [00:24:15] What an encouraging 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** [00:24:26] 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](http://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)