



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 9: Kathy Richardson, Executive Director of Our Community

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Interviewee: Kathy Richardson

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Kathy Richardson, Executive Director of Our Community talks about her have-a-go attitude, curiosity and a team shared manifesto guiding her leadership and her insights into the staggering \$100 billion world of not-for-profit grants.

Julienne [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help activate your leadership. Hi, I'm Julienne Price, Executive Manager 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're here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Rebekah [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and to redefine the business landscape, I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell, and in today's episode, we chat with an incredible woman on a social mission. Kathy Richardson is Executive Director, Group Transformation and Chaos Controller at multi-award-winning social enterprise Our Community. A self-confessed grants nerd, Kathy offers insights into the staggering \$100 billion of not-for-profit grants awarded each year. She shares how her have-a-go attitude, having curiosity in her DNA, and a team-shared manifesto guides her leadership. Kathy, it's wonderful to speak with you today, I'm so excited for our conversation. Where are you joining us from today?

Kathy [00:01:29] I'm on Djadjawurrung country, which is about an hour north of Melbourne, otherwise known as Drummond, out in the middle of the bush, which has been my pandemic home for the past 18 months or so.

Rebekah [00:01:41] That sounds like a wonderful place in the world, so this is a question that I ask everyone to start, can you tell us about your leadership journey?

Kathy [00:01:50] So my story, I suppose, starts in a little rural town called Cohuna up in northern Victoria, which sounds very Hawaiian and tropical, but is actually very inland on the Murray River. I grew up on a dairy farm, one of six daughters with my mum and dad out on a dairy farm four miles out of Cohuna. And I suppose the leadership wasn't really a thing that was talked about in our household. My mum is a nurse, a busy nurse, my dad a busy dairy farmer. And leadership, we didn't move in leadership spheres, if you like those, sort of power spheres that many people grow up in and around in the cities. So there were no lawyers in my family or judges or anything like that. So I suppose leadership wasn't something that I saw in my future. It wasn't something I thought about at all, really. I was a curious kid. My mum was an immigrant from the UK, so we were sort of raised with fairly broad horizons for a dairy farmer family, I suppose. And so I was always very interested in the news and current affairs that led me to seeking out a career in journalism. So I fled the country for Melbourne to learn how to become a journalist. From there, I became a journalist and then at some point, just before my 30s decided I needed a bit of a change. So it was when the industry journalism industry, the wheels were really falling off and they were losing their business model and it was turning into a bit of a sausage factory. So I fled Australia and moved to Thailand for a couple of years, working for the Thai government there. And really, it was after that when I returned to Australia that things sort of became even more interesting for me, I suppose, because I joined an organisation called Our Community, where I've worked now for the past nearly 20 years or so. And from there is where I've really sort of found my feet, I suppose, and found where I wanted to move to.

Rebekah [00:03:47] As I was also kind of preparing to meet you, I hadn't heard of Our Community before, but as I did my research, it's a huge organisation. It would be great if you could just describe our community and what you do.

Kathy [00:03:58] It's one of the most difficult questions I'm asked. I'm always, if I go to a party, it's the question I most dread when people ask, what do you do? What is Our Community? Because it's an organisation that's really unlike any other, it just turned 21 years old. One of the first organisations in Australia, really, that you would probably describe these days as a social enterprise so the organisation straddles that part of the world that sits between sort of a not-for-profit. So an organisation with a social mission and a business that desires to make money and Our Community sits in the apex of those two areas. So we have a social mission. We also have a profit motive. Our founding mission was to build stronger communities through stronger community organisations. So we looked to find out how to help not-for-profit organisations, community organisations and that can be anything from, you know, your little tennis club, your book club right up to large charities that are working in welfare, but to help them learn how to raise money more efficiently, improve their governance that sort of thing. So that was the founding mission. And we began that by developing lots of content for not-for-profit organisations, which is how I ended up joining the organisation. So it was very early on in its history. And they employed me as a journalist. And from there, we have built seven enterprises, including Australia's leading grants management software. It's a software, as a service, cloud based system that's used by hundreds of organisations around Australia to manage their grants. Give Now is another enterprise that allows not-for-profits to manage their donations. Institute of Community Directors Australia is a leadership body for not-for-profit board members and CEOs, and there are others as well, but these are some of the things that we do.

Rebekah [00:05:55] So take me back to 2003, when you first joined Our Community, you'd come back from Thailand. You'd been a journalist. You'd already done some really interesting things. What was it about our community that attracted you?

Kathy [00:06:07] I think one of the things that attracted me was I couldn't work out what it was. So this notion of an organisation that had a social mission but had a profit motive as well was really new to me. And it fit everything that I was about because, you know, I wanted to be paid properly and I wanted to have a career progression. And, you know, all of the things that offered, you can't get in a not-for-profit organisation because all the money is going towards the mission, which I completely agree with, but also had the social mission, like I want to make a difference in the world. And so this to me was the most exciting thing I'd come across and I felt, you know, I was still young. So I thought it's someone told me when I left to go to Thailand and wondered if it was going to be the right thing to do, two years in Thailand sounded like a long time and the best bit of advice I got from someone was it's not jail, Kathy, like, if you don't like it, you can come back. So when I saw this job in this strange organisation that was new, it was a start-up, so I didn't know if it was going to survive the next 12 months that sort of phrase was ringing in my ears. It's not jail, Kathy. You can get another job if it doesn't work out. And also the other thing that attracted me was this incredible leader, Dennis Moriarty, who started this organisation. You know, an entrepreneur, I hadn't been exposed to entrepreneurs in my childhood or anywhere in my career. So this inspiring vision and this have-a-go attitude was just incredibly exciting to me.

Rebekah [00:07:32] It's a great advice. It's not jail. I've often thought that when I've been looking at jobs and thinking, what could I do next? You try something and you can always leave. But obviously you didn't leave, you've been there since 2008, almost coming up 20 years now. Can you tell us about your first role at Our Community? How did you start?

Kathy [00:07:48] It's an interesting question, and I don't think I could have taken on that role and joined this organisation and thrived in it if I didn't have this intense curiosity because the newsletter that I was employed to research and write was called, back then, the Australian Best Practise Grantmaking Quarterly. Now, I had no idea what grantmaking was. I had no idea what a grant was. I just knew I wanted to join this incredible organisation. So as a journalist, what you do is you just do a deep dive. So I began to learn all about grants so that I could bring that knowledge to the Australian grantmaking industry. I should probably explain a little bit about the grantmaking industry, because probably many of your listeners are like I was then, which was, well, what's a grant?

Rebekah [00:08:37] I was going to say a lot of our listeners will be applying for or thinking about applying for grants. So anything you can share about the grants industry would be really helpful, I'm sure.

Kathy [00:08:46] So we estimate there are around \$100 billion in grants that's distributed to not-for-profit organisations and businesses and individuals across Australia every year. So every year there are tens of billions of dollars that's churning out. Mostly they come from government, so from federal and state and local government, but also a lot of people think about philanthropic funding when they think about grants funding because there are a lot of foundations and trusts that give out grants as well. But really, the bulk of that money is coming out from government. So my task when I joined Our Community was to take the knowledge mainly that was coming out of the UK and the US at that time about how to give a grant more efficiently and more effectively. One of the enterprises that we have is called the Funding Centre and that a grants database. So it's a database of all the grants that are given out in Australia all the time. So it's updated constantly. We've got a team of people entering data into that. So you could go to the Funding Centre and get a free trial. There are tricks for beginners so you need to learn the language of grant makers. You need to read their guidelines really carefully that's the best bit of advice I could give, actually, is to go and read the guidelines with a highlighter pen. They are interested in what you're going to do with it, but what they want is for you to tell them how you're going to help them achieve their objectives. So you really need to give that to them in the application form.

Rebekah [00:10:14] Thank you, Kathy, so I understand a lot more now about Our Community and about grants. I want to talk about your leadership because you've grown from, you know, the writing the grants newsletter to being the executive director, about curiosity, how does having curiosity as a superpower help your transition into leadership?

Kathy [00:10:36] So, yes, definitely, curiosity is something that I carry with me. I'd never thought of it as a superpower, but I am going to from now on, joining Our Community, I was interested in everything that the organisation did. I became extremely interested in this area of grants, which to me seemed at the start seemed very niche, something that I wasn't going to stay in for too long. But I found it to be very interesting. I went very deeply into it, and I have had that through my career, that ability to be interested in anything. I often tell the story of when I was a junior journalist going to interview someone who lived in a little suburban house out in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, who had built a boat out of matchsticks. And I remember after that interview going home and thinking, wow, that was super interesting and telling people about it all night and people sort of eyes glazing over. But I thought it was really interesting. Anyway, so curiosity is definitely part of my DNA. And I think the other thing that helped me in my career is that I wasn't looking for leadership, particularly. I never went searching for that. So I wasn't building a career. I wasn't looking for opportunities to shift into leadership positions. I just wanted to get the work done. And I think that is not always useful to people. If you're working in particular, you know, in corporates and I think in government as well, you probably have to be a bit more intentional about it. But in this particular organisation, which is very low ego, very flat structured, it meant that I thrived in that environment because my potential, I suppose, was more easy to identify.

Rebekah [00:12:20] Because you're so curious, you're really looking to learn.

Kathy [00:12:23] To learn and also to get it done, so really motivated by the mission of the organisation so and that's something that, you know, there's the 70 staff in Our Community, we're all motivated by this idea that we can build stronger, more inclusive communities by enabling the people that do the heavy, lifting the work really at the pointy end. So our task as we see it is to clear the way for those people who are doing that exceptionally important work at the pointy end of trying to help people find homes, trying to make sure immigrants have a better time when they arrive, helping schools become more inclusive. All of those things that those people are doing, we're not doing that really hard and tough work, but we see our job to clear the path for those people, and that is incredibly motivating. When you're motivated by a mission, it makes you very focused not on egos or who's doing things right or wrong, or whether you're stuffing things up along the way. It focuses you on moving forward together.

Rebekah [00:13:28] Your mission is very clear, and it's such a powerful mission to support other not for profits who are doing such worthwhile work, and that must be so motivating for your team. Is there anything

that you do to really bring that to life and keep that alive for the team as they're doing their work to keep them connected to the kind of organisations that they're supporting as they're doing the work?

Kathy [00:13:51] We worked really closely with all of our members and users. So there are people that we train, there are people who are members of parts of our business and there are people who buy our software. So however we interact with those stakeholders, you know, we don't have chat bots, we have people who answer the phone. We see those people at the pointy end and we hear them and we do our best to help them. So we're very well connected with them. We also have that mission, you know, building stronger communities through stronger community organisations, plastered on everything around the building in which we work when we're allowed to work there. And another thing that we did about 10 years ago, which I think has been absolutely integral to the success of the organisation, is we went through a process with the staff to create a manifesto, is what we call it. In the manifesto, we describe who we are, what we do, how we work and why we do it. So because the staff helped us to develop that, they very much invested in that manifesto and we cited all the time, you know, if someone applies for a job with our community, they have to pick one part of that manifesto and tell us why it resonates with them. We recruit based on alignment with values. We have the manifesto printed on the walls. We have it on our mouse pads. We cite it to each other all the time, and it's just become a really important way of reinforcing how we work and why we're doing what we're doing.

Rebekah [00:15:22] In my research about you, Kathy, I learnt that you were awarded in 2014 an Eisenhower Fellowship. Can you tell us what that is?

Kathy [00:15:30] So the Eisenhower Fellowship is one of the world's best kept secrets I think. It's a fairly low profile fellowship programme run out of America. It's been running for 50 years or so. And the purpose of the fellowship named after the former President Eisenhower of America is to bring together mid-career professionals from around the world to bring them to America, to meet each other, but also to become part of the fellowship community of the American Fellowship and to travel around America meeting Americans in your field of interest. So each of the fellows that takes part in a fellowship has a different fellowship journey, but coming together at the start and in the middle and at various times. So you get to know each other, you get to know the organisation and all the fellows that have gone before you, both in your own country and across the world. But you also get to do this incredible deep dive into an aspect of your work that you want to explore more of.

Rebekah [00:16:34] I've seen a few of these fellowship type programmes I did one called the Australian American Leadership Programme, which was kind of similar, probably not quite as structured, but I remember coming back and thinking I could have got so much more out of that because there was such incredible people there. Can you tell us, you know, you obviously got a lot out of it? What are some tips on how you approached going to America taking up the fellowship? How did you come back with such a large, I guess, return on investment of your time?

Kathy [00:17:03] Well, I'm a nerd at heart. I was always a nerd at school. I was a nerd at uni and I'm still a nerd, so I'm a grants nerd but I'm also just a nerd in general. So when I was presented with this incredible opportunity, I wasn't going to waste it, so I spent lots of evenings Googling, researching, I made spreadsheets. So I was very clear long before I got over to the States who I wanted to meet and what I wanted to ask them. Research, I over prepare for everything and that I find can be a waste of time sometimes but mostly it's really useful and I applied the same principle when I was over there. So when I was in the States, I'd have five or six meetings every day and in the evenings I'd type up all of my notes and I'd prepare for the following day's meetings, which meant, again, Googling the people I was going to be meeting with, writing myself some dot points about what I needed to absolutely not forget to ask them. So that meant when I was in my sixth meeting for the day in my seventh week of travelling around the states and was presented with these incredible person but just who happened to perhaps be my, you know, 60th meeting my brain didn't freeze and I knew what to ask them. And obviously being a journalist in my past helped with that as well, because there's just a genuine interest in and questioning that goes with my personality, you now that helped. But yes, typing up those notes every night, I'm thanking past me for that every day because I still go into those notes and look back on the information that I got through those incredible meetings and also all the contacts that I gained.

Rebekah [00:18:44] Have you stayed in contact with a lot of them?

Kathy [00:18:46] Several and in fact, the thing that I also did as part of my nerdiness was I emailed each one of those people to thank them, and that was actually genuine. But it also meant that I had an entree went on, you know, 12 months later, when I wanted to go back and ask them a favour or ask them something that I had already made contact with them after the meeting to say, thanks so much. I got so much out of it.

Rebekah [00:19:10] That's a clever tip, so you could just reply to that email when you wanted to go back.

Kathy [00:19:14] Absolutely, there was a thread.

Rebekah [00:19:16] When we spoke last time you talked about moving into your 40s and how it is still very young, Kathy. And some things that you might have changed in terms of your priorities or how you thought about your own leadership, turning 40 was a huge turning point for me. Just think, as a leader, you're kind of like, okay, I've arrived, this is me. What are some of the things that you feel like you've learnt or changed in your 40s?

Kathy [00:19:41] I no longer care so much if people like me. I still do care if people like me. I still want people to like me. But actually, I don't find it a personal affront anymore if someone doesn't like something that I say on Twitter, or if I'm too outspoken at a dinner party, which I often am, I'm less worried about that. I don't go home and think about that and worry about it like I perhaps did in my 20s and 30s. And I think that's a thing that a lot of women do because we're sort of raised to want to be liked. So, yes, that's something that switched for me in my 40s.

Rebekah [00:20:20] Can I ask, is that a reprioritisation of, you know, you prioritise maybe something else over being liked?

Kathy [00:20:28] I think so. I think it's also to do with really finding my feet in this organisation that I work for and finding sort of a mission in life. And it's being focused on, you know, what do I want to do? And I want to create more space for diversity in Australia. I want to play a role in that. I want to make Australia more inclusive. I want to reduce inequality. I want the place to be fairer. And to me, that makes me much more brave because that mission is so critical.

Rebekah [00:20:55] Yes, that is such a wonderful point. I wish in my 20s and 30s, I just focused more on getting the important things done that I wanted to do and say the things I wanted to say.

Kathy [00:21:04] You don't know what they are though then though right? You don't necessarily; you haven't kind of worked that out by your 20s and 30s. Some people have, like I say, these young women, you know, like your Greta Thunbergs and Grace Tames and these amazing young women, they've worked it out already, but I haven't.

Rebekah [00:21:21] That is very true but thank you for articulating that so beautifully that the reprioritisation of saying what you think and that getting stuff done is more important than worrying about what people think. You also mentioned that your approach to leadership changed and earlier in your career that you should follow others and look to how others lead and you realised that you should just be Kathy.

Kathy [00:21:41] You know, I said earlier that I wasn't really looking for a life of leadership, and I still absolutely baulk at the idea of my name and leadership being in the same sentence, to be completely honest. And I don't think that's just being humble, I think there are lots of different types of leadership and often the model of leader that we've been told is the model that we should aspire to is this sort of heroic man model of leadership. So it's the strong man, usually white man that's the sort of what we think of when we think about leadership. And it took me a long time to realise that I can be a leader in my own way that I don't have to put forward this incredibly, you know, strong front from time-to-time. Maybe you want to be vulnerable, you can be a lot more collaborative. It doesn't have to be, you know, the one hero that saves us all that pushes us forward as a society that you can work with people and share power and bring others with you and know when to shut up that last one is something I'm still working on.

Rebekah [00:22:48] If I was working with you in your organisation, how would you appear to me as a leader?

Kathy [00:22:53] Oh, that's a good question, I hope I would appear as less of a leader and more of a colleague that we're sharing a mission and that my job is to help us achieve the mission. I hope you would see me as compassionate and kind. I like to try and understand what motivates people and what also can impede them from time to time. So everyone comes to work with a massive backstory of caring responsibilities and past good and bad experiences and all that sort of stuff. And these are all the things that we all bring to bear in our everyday interactions at work. I think when a leader can see the whole person; hopefully they're a better manager, if not leader.

Rebekah [00:23:40] Last question I ask all our guests is we have a Leadership Toolbox in Leading Women, is there a tool you can give our listeners for their Toolbox?

Kathy [00:23:50] I thought about this a little bit and this one might be a little bit from left field. But when I was thinking about something that's really helped expand my mind and broaden my horizons in the past 10 years, one thing I thought about was there's this podcast called Invisibilia. I don't know if you've heard of it. It's produced by NPR, which is an independent, non-profit media organisation in the US. Invisibilia means it's a Latin word that means invisible things, and the podcast series is designed to bring to the light the invisible forces that shape our experiences as human, moving through the world. This concept to me sort of brings together storytelling and science and by making these invisible forces visible, I think we have a much better opportunity to understand them and to push back against them. So I think sometimes we go through life thinking we can make our own way and we can to a degree. But actually also we are subject to lots of invisible forces that are determining the decisions we make and where we end up in life and bringing those into the light, I think is a really powerful tool for us all to think about.

Rebekah [00:25:07] Invisibilia, we'll put a link in the show notes to the podcast, Kathy, that was such a great conversation. I know that I've learnt so much from talking to you. Thank you for your insights, and I'm really glad to have learnt about Our Community. You're doing some incredible work on behalf of all of us. Thanks for all the work that you're doing.

Kathy [00:25:27] Thanks, Rebekah, it was great to chat.

Julienne [00:25:30] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate 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 [#leadingwomensaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)

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