



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

**Episode 10: Amanda Healy, CEO and Founder, Kirrikin and
Founder of Warrikal**

**Hosted by: Liandra Gaykamangu, Founder and Creative Director of
Liandra Swim
Interviewee: Amanda Healy**

This episode celebrates Indigenous women in business with host Liandra Gaykamangu, proud Yolngu woman and Founder and Creative Director of Liandra Swim and guest Amanda Healy, CEO and Founder of Kirrikin. Amanda talks about leveraging entrepreneurship to connect and support Indigenous artists and communities by drawing deep connections to country through fashion, leading by example, and encouraging us all to be fierce.

Simone [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help you activate your leadership. Hello, I'm Simone Kenmore, a proud Yankunytjatjara woman and Executive Manager of CommBank's Indigenous Business Banking. I'm coming to you today on Gadigal Country and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. This episode of Leading Women celebrates Indigenous women in business. Today we have a very special host, Liandra Gaykamangu, proud Yolngu woman and founder and creative director of Liandra Swim. With special guest Amanda Healy, an Aboriginal woman of the Wonnarua nation and CEO and founder of Kirrikin and founder of Warrikal. Enjoy this episode of Leading Women and be inspired by the strength and resilience of two Aboriginal women taking the fashion world by storm and giving back to community in the process. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised this podcast may contain conversations about deceased persons. Discretion is advised.

Liandra [00:01:18] Hi, I'm Liandra Gaykamangu, your host for this special episode where we have a yarn with an impactful business leader creating ripples of social change. Amanda Healy is CEO of Warrikal and Managing Director of Indigenous fashion brand Kirrikin and my mentor and friend. Today, she shares rich stories from over 30 years forging a successful leadership career in the male-dominated world of mining and leveraging entrepreneurship to connect and support Indigenous artists and communities by drawing deep connections to country through fashion. A lifelong learner, Amanda leads by example, encouraging us all to be fierce, be prepared and never take no for an answer to create an impact. Thanks for joining us on Leading Women, Amanda.

Amanda [00:02:06] Good morning.

Liandra [00:02:07] Where are you joining us from today?

Amanda [00:02:08] I'll give you a hint, bonjour. I am today in Paris. I'm living in the most beautiful area. Beautiful, big, open avenues right out my window, I can see this gorgeous little courtyard that's full of lovely green plants. And we walk outside; people are sitting in cafes, sipping their espressos, watching the world go by. It's a truly different experience and really, truly beautiful to be here.

Liandra [00:02:39] Amanda, yours is such a unique and remarkable leadership journey. Can you share with us your path to here?

Amanda [00:02:46] I guess it's been a bit of a winding path to get here, but I guess I started my very early career in the mining industry and hit my first leadership role in the late 80s, which is a long time ago now. And some, my final job with BHP in those days was in Canada in the remote Northwest Territories where I ended as the manager of HR and Community there. Then in a few years I did a few jobs for Argyle Diamonds here in Australia and a large computing company, but really found that it was extremely hard to manage a young son on my own, as a single mum. So, in a moment of madness, I thought if I had my own business, it would be a lot easier. So, in 2003, Max was just five years old, I started my own business, which was ultimately Max Engineering. Max Engineering was sold to a big international company in 2015, so it was quite a successful business. But around the same time, it became, actually a little bit earlier than that, 2010, it became a thing to identify as an Aboriginal business and it really annoyed me that there's such a big hole in the authentic Aboriginal artefacts space. Everything was made overseas; everything was made in the style of with no connection to Aboriginal people. So around that time I complained about it for a few years and a few years later I decided to start Kirrikin myself, which ultimately became a social enterprise. And the purpose of that was really to create sustainable incomes for Aboriginal artists and particularly remote artists. But over time it's sort of morphed into helping particularly single Aboriginal mothers or Indigenous mothers, not necessarily just Aboriginal, and that's been a great journey for me. And then after the Max Engineering business was sold, I sort of thought for a little moment I would focus on myself for a year or two. So, I did an MBA here at Curtin University, and during the course of that program I met two fantastic fellas that I'm now in business with and we've set up Warrikal, which commenced in 2017, which has been an amazing business, really profitable, and just hit the ground at the right time, doing the right things.

Liandra [00:05:11] So after the diamond mines, which you know, I have personally been quite fascinated in because I mean, just talking about that a little bit, it wasn't just like you were in Canada or you were outside of Vancouver or Toronto. You were in quite a remote part of Canada. Can you just share a little bit about what that was like? Because I know some of the stories that you've shared with me, you know, I live in a tropical hot place that kind of climate is my happy place. And you were in the complete opposite of that, so I'd love you to share a little bit about that if you could.

Amanda [00:05:44] That was really interesting, I still recall the day I moved to Canada, I left Perth in early February '94, I think it was, and it was a steaming hot day, 42 degrees perhaps in Perth, jumped on a plane and flew to a place called Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. And it was a balmy 32 below I think, that day. So, I had a turnaround of some 70 degrees, you know, like the cold hit you like a brick. It's hard to imagine that sort of cold.

Liandra [00:06:19] Yes, no, thank you.

Amanda [00:06:22] But it was a pretty remote part of the world, yes. Yellowknife is just about 500 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle, and we used to fly up a couple of hundred kilometres north of Yellowknife into some very remote territory. I remember the first week I think I got there, one of the guys came and said to me, come on, come on outside and I walked outside and the caribou were migrating through because they don't care that you're mining there. They don't follow the signs. And these caribou were just coming through in like unbelievable numbers. So, we were sort of hemmed in this small little mining camp and we were hemmed in by caribou who had no respect for, you know, like the rules and regulations. They just wandered through. That was really an interesting experience. And the group I worked with there were fantastic. It's always about the people, isn't it?

Liandra [00:07:14] Yes, you can love a job, but if you also have a great team around you, I think it makes it so much easier to get things done, particularly if you're in a difficult and remote location that can be quite challenging in and of itself. Now, Amanda, one of the things that I really admire about you, and I want to just take it back a little bit to talk about your time currently in Paris, but you have quite a commitment to being a lifelong learner and you are currently, as we mentioned, studying in Paris and growing your design skills. You have a fashion label called Kirrikin. How is it going and what have you been doing?

Amanda [00:07:53] It's a bit mind-blowing, actually. I've got this amazing lecturer. She's a Russian designer and I'm guessing she's probably in early thirties and just full of life and energy and enthusiasm. I love that sort of character in people. It is so different to what I anticipated. It's very avant-garde, I suppose. You know, like it's a very different approach, a very creative approach to fashion. I was expecting a very linear, this is what

you do, this is how you do things. But we've started off doing collages and creating our own fashion from pieces of paper, you know, like cutting things out and pasting them on. And then you draw over them and I'm just having so much fun with it. I'm here for eight weeks and this is just the first week of it, as I said.

Liandra [00:08:39] You have quite opposing careers and businesses. And I think this is one of the things that I also find very interesting about you. And, you know, you're pulled in quite opposite directions of your businesses and careers. And both, might I just add, are highly successful, on one hand you work in quite a traditionally feminine space in fashion and your label Kirrikin primarily does womenswear. But you were also one of the founders of Warrikal and have worked in the mining industry for, let's say around 30 years at least. So, you know, the mining industry is quite a traditionally male-dominated space, I think is fair to say. Can you share the ways that Kirrikin and Warrikal connect, support, share and grow through those different business entities? And what do you feel differs between the two?

Amanda [00:09:30] The commonality between the two is that we are both very community-focused, so wherever we can, we'll support community members. Kirrikin itself is a social enterprise and we actively work to support the artists, amazing artists I might say, that I put on my scarves and clothing, and I guess Warrikal allows me to do that in a way in that it provides a stable income for me to do that. But also, we support the community in different ways. Warrikal commits quite a bit of money to scholarships for kids to go to school, particularly from remote areas and to good schools here in Perth so those that have got boarding capability. So as much as they're different, they are similar because construction is construction is construction. And there's process and project management in I think just about every industry you work in and process is probably your, you know, your saving grace in any industry you work in. And then as long as you have a defined process, most people can work around that and great people with great attitudes are like gold. You want to hold on to them and look after them. I've got a few of those around me in both of those industries, which is amazing.

Liandra [00:10:55] With that thought has it been intentional to be a part of the creation, I guess with Warrikal, but then to create Kirrikin and be a type of business leader that invests so strongly back into others and not just I mean, you are a fiercely proud Aboriginal woman from the Hunter Valley region and you do so much to reinvest back into the Indigenous community around the country, not just from where you're from, but you have a huge impact in WA and across the country. Has that always been intentional from the beginning to invest into others and into the communities of which you're a part of?

Amanda [00:11:36] That's an interesting question, I cannot truthfully tell you that I started out to do that. But when you start to see how people struggle in daily life, in learning or in whatever, I can't help but want to help in that situation. I mean, when I started Kirrikin, the intention was really that it was just something to fill a hole that was blatantly obvious in the market. But then when I started to talk to the artists about, could I use their stuff, and at that time there wasn't really any arrangements around, you know, there wasn't any structure around how you deal with artists, it became obvious that it would be really nice to be able to, you know, I was thinking I will just buy a one-off piece and use it for 12 months or two years or whatever lifespan is of that print. But it's become so much more than that. You know, some of the prints that I have I'll use for years because they're timeless, they're beautiful, they tell our stories and they do so with such elegance in my mind, you know, like that's what I see, that it's hard to ignore. I don't feel like as a human being who has had a relatively privileged life that I could ignore the situation of most of the people that I'm related to and work with and live with in a community, you know.

Liandra [00:13:10] No, absolutely, when I came into the space a few years ago, Amanda Healy was the name that I was told that I needed to meet this person. Amanda Healy. And I did a bit of, okay, who is she? I was in Wollongong at the time, and I Googled, and you were over in Perth, and I thought, well, how am I going to meet her? And you know, fast forward a couple of years and here we are talking and I'm grateful to call you one of my friends and colleagues, but has, do you think the way that you grew up played a part in how you re-invest into people, communities and the industries of which you're a part of?

Amanda [00:13:48] I think so, my dad was an Aboriginal man from a time when life was really difficult. I mean, I used to think in my young days that we had it pretty tough, but absolutely nothing compared to what our parents and grandparents experienced. And you'll know that Liandra, you would have seen that very clearly. So, to watch his struggle with himself, with his identity, with what was happening to his people, with

his, I guess, sense of what was fair and right and what he explained to us or displayed to us throughout his life, I mean, he came from a different era. It was a, you know, don't tell, you don't talk about anything but it's how you behave, I guess, that gives you all the clues to how you should do. And I guess that, you know, I'm one of seven children and I guess that, you know, there was always that scramble too to be noticed. Hey, hey, what about me? So, I guess I had always, I was always ambitious. I always wanted to do something. I just really wasn't very clear what that might be. I guess part of being one of seven children was there was never any limitations because my mum and dad had no time to make sure that we were sort of corralled into a very, you know, narrow sphere of thinking so we really just, nobody ever said, no, you can't do that, to me. So, you know, I always take that as a given these days. I can do whatever I like, you know, I think that's a great lesson for everyone, really.

Liandra [00:15:24] Do you find that that has helped you consistently step into the light as opposed from maybe backing away from some of those moments in your career that may have been a little bit daunting, particularly, I guess, in that male-dominated arena.

Amanda [00:15:43] I don't love stepping into the limelight, I have to say. I do it because I feel it's necessary. It's necessary to open doors these days, isn't it? And it's still, even in the 80s and 90s, I felt a bit that way. But these days it really annoys me that Aboriginal businesses are seen in a certain way. Or Aboriginal people are seen in a certain way. So, it's sort of more important to me that it is opening a space or holding a space for future generations, for the people like you coming through, you know, like anything's possible these days and I think we just have to show it.

Liandra [00:16:22] Your current collection with Kirrikin is called Ripples, and I think that it's a beautiful metaphor for both what you just touched on. But then also when you're reflecting on your own life and seeing the ripples of change, what were some of the inspirations behind the prints and the designs that kind of built out that collection, Ripples? And then what did that mean to you on a deeper level?

Amanda [00:16:47] I guess I'll go deeper first because for me the change in our community has been remarkable. And certainly, in the last ten years, the interest in opening up and telling stories and inviting people in, but also more broadly Australians being more open to hearing our stories and understanding what happened and understanding that being Aboriginal isn't about the colour of your skin or where you live, it's actually about what your bloodlines are; who you belong to. So, for me to see that change in the last ten years has been quite fantastic. I'm old enough to remember pre-1967 and I remember the limitations that were placed on my dad. So, for me, it was very, you know, it's been a very important journey to see this change and wonderful to see this change. I mean, we had a little spurt in the 80s, probably late 80s, early 90s, with all the protest songs and the Midnight Oils and the Goanna band, and still my favourite protest songs. So that sort of translated to me, so I got this marvelous artist named Helena Geiger, who is from Gumbaynggirr Country in Northern New South Wales, and she does this beautiful work on fabrics and mostly she does it through "batiking", is the methodology she uses to do her prints, but tells stories of things that are important to her as a child growing up. So, she used to sit on the bank of the river with her dad fishing. And the thing that was most important to her or mesmerised her was the ripples on the water. And so that's a beautiful blue, like all sorts of shades of blue. So of course, that was a natural for the collection, but grevillea was a piece by a much younger woman, who is from the Yuwaalaraay country and Western New South Wales. And it wasn't intentional that they were both from New South Wales. They just fitted so nicely together, which is a beautiful red and cream colour and it just is the story of the grevillea. And she was inspired to draw it, because she loved the colours and shapes of the grevillea. But to me it sort of screamed about the need for water and how important it is. Water is life and it all fit in to this ripples theme. That was my thinking on it.

Liandra [00:19:07] I don't know if you used to do this, but when I was growing up, the dew in the morning when it would be on grevillea, it was the best time to go out and hit the grevillea. You could hit it against anything, but you know, we would do it on our hands and you would be able to eat the honey out of the grevillea, I guess ahead of the birds. But I think it's a beautiful connection just there for me anyway to be able to think about this beautiful native Australian plant, but then also ripples and how that's kind of all interconnected as well. And I think that really is what helps to set you apart in so many ways, the way that you're able to tie in that level of detail and bring that together in a beautiful design. Now I know that you don't like to talk about all your accolades and the things that other people acknowledge, the hard work in what you do across the fields that you're in, but I want to read like verbatim some of the things that you have been

acknowledged for. And this includes the prestigious Indigenous in Business Award at the Ethnic Business Awards at the C20 in Brisbane for Max Engineering and being a finalist in Telstra for Businesswoman of the Year. You've had a number of small business awards in regional WA, and I mean just last week I Googled some awards for export awards and you, Kirrikin, were up for that. So, I am in constant awe about where you sort of reach for, but also that the things that people don't know the things that we can't Google. And can you tell us a little bit about your time in Thailand recently as well? Because I think that was a moment where I just thought if there's anybody there representing me as a designer and Indigenous designer, I was so happy that it was you in Thailand sharing about some of the ways that Indigenous fashion can really help to share, connect and export successfully into the international market.

Amanda [00:21:15] Yes, of course but you couldn't attend because you were in New York so that was a bit of an issue for you. So no, APEC was really interesting. APEC is about economic communities and interestingly, historically, APEC deals with just large business. So, for the first time ever, they pulled together a group of Small Medium Enterprises to discuss their impact on the community or the broader community and trying to create better relationships between our entire Asia-Pacific community. It was amazing. It was just absolutely amazing. There were people from Canada, from New Guinea, from all the South American countries, China, Russia were all in attendance, Korea. So, it was really a fantastic opportunity just to talk to other small businesses and understand what's going on for them and what level they're at. And some, you know, some are very early stage entering into commerce in some of the South American countries and some of the Pacific nations are still struggling. So, for me, that's you know, that's a real leveler, you look at where other people are, and you go, we really have it pretty good in Australia despite some of our mob still struggling, we actually are moving forward, which is fantastic.

Liandra [00:22:37] I would have to agree with you. It wasn't until I sort of stepped out into the international space, as you said, I was in New York earlier this year. I had the luxury of seeing some First Nations runway as a part of New York Fashion Week. One of the things that I did notice is how in Australia how forward thinking we were in embracing the different, I guess, melting pot of cultures that are here, but in particular, around First Nations identity, voice and history.

Amanda [00:23:04] Yes, absolutely and for this group, the Commonwealth Bank, to give us this platform to, I don't know how many people we reach, but it's probably a lot more than I do, is quite remarkable that they're stepping up to the mark and providing us a platform to talk from. It is amazing and we are so much better off. I spoke to a woman from Peru, who gave me this most beautiful little llama keychain. It was incredible. And she was in tears, she was in tears listening to my story because she said this is just remarkable. You know, like, how do your women do this? And I'm like, I have to say, it is with the broader support of our community, and they don't have it, you know, they just want to make pennies to actually improve their families' lives and make things better for them. And they're all very crafty and capable. But yes, the contrast is interesting and anything we can do to help, like I'm there for it, I would love to go and show them how to commercialise some of their stuff.

Liandra [00:24:13] I think that's a really, really important point. We haven't got to this point today in business. I mean, it's coming off the back of remarkable, forward-thinking, hard-working people for decades that have really paved the way. And I think, Amanda, in so many ways, you are one of those people, the upbringing that you've had is very humbling. You know, you've said that it was a privileged upbringing, but I think within that there were other struggles. What is some of the advice that you can maybe bestow onto some of the women that are coming up through the ranks of the industry that they've chosen to find their career path in? And they may be feeling like a little bit of an outsider, how would you advise those women if you had them in a room to step into that power and not shrink away, but to embrace that they are, you know, there's not many of those faces and that's okay, what would you sort of say to them?

Amanda [00:25:12] The couple of messages I would give is be fierce. Be fierce and be prepared. You know, like I very early on, learnt, don't try and play the same game. Play your own game. So, you know, just do what you do as best you can. But the other thing that I always say is, don't take no for an answer. Never take no for an answer. And my very favourite quote of all time came from Yoda from Star Wars. So, now I'm showing my age, is from the Star Wars trilogy was, do or do not, there is no try, so it's that simple, just do it.

Liandra [00:25:53] One of the things that I've come to notice, I juggle a little bit being in the not-for-profit organisation that I'm in and then working in the swimwear label as well. And I see you juggling so many different things. What do you do to take care of your mental health and nourish yourself to make sure that you can kind of back it up day-after-day, week-after-week?

Amanda [00:26:13] So I'll do a couple of things. One, my partner insists that I sit down and have dinner with him every night. He cooks it, by the way, and that's a really nice space, that's a really nice thing to do. Even though we sometimes argue about silly little issues, but he takes care of me in that way. So, I've got to take my hat off to him. The other thing I love to do is take a break every now and then even if it's a long weekend to go out bush, get on country, go to the beach. Sometimes, you know, once or twice a year, I'll try and have a few days up in Bali and just relax or somewhere like that wherever it might be. Might be Broome, might be Exmouth, whatever, but to take some time for myself a couple of times a year and just have a good break and actually they're getting more and more frequent lately. So, I must be either managing things better or feeling it more. I'm not quite sure, not sure what the answer is to that.

Liandra [00:27:14] It's comforting to know that you can learn that skill over time, I guess. I am not somebody that easily switches off to my own detriment. I'm not saying that that's a good thing. It's a, I think, one of my flaws. We're coming to the end of our time and our discussion together, Amanda and at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership by adding practical tools to ignite women's leadership. So, with that in mind, what I'd love for you to share with us all today is how can we all inspire the next generation of business leaders? It's a pretty big question.

Amanda [00:27:55] It is a huge question, but for me, I think I'm very big on leading by example. I wouldn't ask someone to do something that I can't or won't do. So, I would say, just do your best. Be you. Do the best that you can do and show others that it's possible.

Liandra [00:28:16] Amanda, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm always impressed by the stories that you share with me and so grateful for the wisdom and the words of encouragement that I get from you day-in and day-out. And I'm really grateful that you've been able to share what you've built with Kirrikin and Warriikal.

Amanda [00:28:34] Thank you so much for having me, Liandra, as usual it's a delight to have a yarn up with you, and we sort of travel all over the place. But I'm so grateful that at least we've got one recorded, so we know that we do speak regularly. And again, thanks very much, and au revoir from Paris.

Simone [00:28:53] Thank you to Liandra Gaykamangu for hosting this very special episode of our Leading Women podcast, celebrating Indigenous Women in Business, and to Amanda Healy for sharing her story and insights all the way from Paris. Remember, you can 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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